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"Juana Huelgista" : Latina women on strike in Watsonville, California, 1985-1987

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"*JUANA HUELGISTA*": LATINA WOMEN ON STRIKE IN WATSONVILLE, CALIFORNIA, 1985-1987

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ABSTRACT

"*JUANA HUELGISTA*": LATINA WOMEN ON STRIKE IN WATSONVILLE, CALIFORNIA, 1985-1987

By Lillian Elizabeth Duck

This thesis discusses the experiences of women involved in the Watsonville Canning Strike. Aspects of the strike experience that have been explored include working conditions preceding the strike, resistance within the canneries, the onset of the strike, women's opportunity to assume leadership positions, and strike violence. Active strikers were much more willing to share details of strife, difficult working conditions and resistance within the canneries than less active strikers.

The main sources of information for this essay include interviews with eight strikers and the elected business agent for Teamsters Local 912. Two local papers: The Watsonville Register-Pajaronian and the Santa Cruz Sentinel were reviewed. In addition, valuable information came from a tour of Watsonville Canning and a video recording of the events of the strike as they occurred.

This thesis will partially fulfill the need to tell the story of working class Latina women in the United States.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The completion of this thesis and the entire Master's program at San Jose State University represents the attainment of a personal goal. Many individuals have helped make this accomplishment possible and it would be impossible to name each one. There are some individuals, however, that I must single out.

First, I must pay a special thank you to the women in Watsonville who took time out of their busy lives for interviews with me. Their willingness to share the details of hardship, tears, and joy provides the basis for my research. The story of their struggles will, I hope, inspire others to continue the ongoing battle against discrimination and inequity.

I also must thank the librarians at both the Santa Cruz Sentinel and the Watsonville Public Library for so graciously assisting me with my research. Their organized files and helpful suggestions made finding the information I needed much easier.

I owe deep gratitude to Dr. Billie Jensen. She not only kept me on track throughout the past two years, but also reviewed all of my work and provided a much needed honest opinion. Her guidance allowed me to mature from a determined student into a more thoughtful scholar. I would also like to thank Irma Eichhorn for her support and encouragement throughout the Master's program. The time and effort she spent reviewing the initial work for this thesis set a standard for quality that I hope I have been able to maintain. I would also like to thank Drs. Richard Cramer and Peter Buzanski for so carefully reviewing this work.

I could never have begun this project without the drive I inherited from my Mom, Lilly Sabel, nor been able to complete it without the judgment and stability provided by my Dad, Juan Armando Marrujo. Mom's unwavering belief that I could accomplish anything I set my mind to kept me motivated even when it all seemed overwhelming. Dad's many thoughtful suggestions and insights provided a balance to my research that I hope has found its way into the final product. My sister-in-law, Laura Duck, deserves an award for listening to me ramble on and on about how the project was coming along. She has an uncanny ability to point out the flaws in my logic and forced me to rethink or further support my initial findings.

Thomas Duck, more than anyone else, knows how much this project meant to me and how much was sacrificed to complete it. I have jokingly called him my "Lotto ticket" for the past several years and I hope he realizes, between the laughs, how much I sincerely love and appreciate him. He has been as devoted to this project as I have, keeping our home life afloat so that I could concentrate my energies on research and writing. I honestly cannot say which one of us worked harder.

Finally, I must acknowledge my children. Brennen, who not only let me take naps in the afternoon after working late the night before, but who also spent countless evenings with me at the kitchen table, both of us doing our "homework." And Tommi, whose entire infancy passed while this project was in progress, provided many smiles and necessarily silly breaks that kept life in perspective. Without them, I would not have understood as clearly the motivation of the women in Watsonville, who sacrificed so much for their own children.

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the women in Watsonville,
for all their strength and perseverance,
in hopes that their children will take fullest advantage
of the opportunities that so much has been
sacrificed to provide

CHAPTER ONE

LATINAS IN THE SOUTHWEST: A HISTORY OF ASSERTION

> *Pues, yo pienso que vinimos todos a buscar la vida mejor para sus hijos, porque yo siempre pensaba en los niños. Vivíamos en Mexicali y yo miraba tanta pobreza alrededor. . . hijos sin zapatos y todo y Yo siempre pensaba que vamos a venir.* [1] - Sara Arredondo

The past several decades have witnessed the emergence of new types of cultural and social histories examining the lives of previously overlooked peoples. Some of the first new scholarly works attempted to answer basic questions such as, "who were they and what were their lives like?" More sophisticated histories, building upon the first studies, then attempt to incorporate "forgotten" people into the larger history of nation and state. Asking new questions, such as "how did these populations assert themselves," historians have tried to show that previously ignored groups significantly shaped the world we live in today. This same process is occurring for Latina[2] women in the Southwest.

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[1] Well, I think that we all came in search of a better life for our children because I always thought about my children. When we lived in Mexicali and I saw such poverty all around . . . children without shoes and all and I always thought that we would come. - Sara Arredondo, interview by author, 18 October 1995, Watsonville, Ca., tape recording, Norcal Crosetti Frozen Foods, Inc., Watsonville, Ca.

[2] Many different terms have been used to describe the women of mixed European and Indian heritage, who either migrated north from Mexico or were born in the United States including Spanish-Mexican, Spanish, Mexican, Mexican-American, Chicana, Hispanic, *Mestiza*, *Mestija*, *Californiana*, and Latina. The terms used in this text reflect the choice of other authors when discussing points taken from their work. Otherwise, Latina will be used for both stylistic purposes and as it currently appears to be the least

The history of Latina women in the Southwest has been marred with stereotypes which failed to recognize the contributions of both the earliest Latina settlers and later Latinas whose grueling work in the garment and agricultural industries provided inexpensive clothing and food for our entire society. Latina women throughout history have been viewed as lazy or indifferent to circumstances around them.[3] A closer examination of the evidence reveals that Latina women have played an active role in shaping the world around them and have a history of standing up for themselves and others.

Recent scholarship, examining the role of women in the settling of the early American Southwest, has begun to produce a new view of Latina women who traveled north from Mexico, not only as passive victims of patriarchy, but also as women who used available resources to assert themselves and shape their world. Officials in Spain and Mexico recognized early the importance of sending women to assist in the colonization of the northern frontier. Women were expected to start families and provide role models to neophyte Indian women in the missions. Their most important job was to ensure the development of strong Catholic communities in the wilderness. The historical

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controversial. Latino will be used in the same manner as Latina, except that it denotes specifically men or the entire community, depending on the context.

[3] Antonia Castañeda, "Gender, Race, and Culture: Spanish-Mexican Women in the Historiography of Frontier California," Frontiers 11, no. 1 (1990) 18; Brian Frith-Smith, "Stereotypes about Mexicans in the Mass Media: News Coverage from the Watsonville Cannery Workers Strike, 1985-1987" (Senior Thesis, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1993), 31.

record reveals that Latina women did much more. They owned shops, businesses and farms. They were ministers, midwives, godmothers, servants, barmaids, and doctors.[4]

Not all Latina women passively followed fathers and husbands to the northern frontier, although most traveled as part of a nuclear family.[5] Latina women began to arrive on the frontier within five years of initial Spanish expeditions.[6] Some of the first women came with the Juan Bautista de Anza expedition of 1775-1776. Thirty-two women traveled with their husbands and children. Eight of them were pregnant at the start of the expedition. Several other women married along the way. Among the travelers were Martina Botiller and María Feliciana Arballo, a widow who sang boisterous songs around the campfire at night.[7] Martina Botiller may have been willing to make the trip north to improve her family's fortunes. Her home town of Sinaloa had recently flooded and was poverty-stricken. After migrating north, Botiller lived out her years in California and saw each of her sons receive the title "Don" as owners of large

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[4] Hedda Garza, Latinas: Hispanic Women in the United States (New York: Franklin Watts, 1994), 19 .

[5] Salomé Hernández, "Three Spanish California Settlement Schemes, 1790-1800," Southern California Quarterly 72 (Fall 1990): 208. Evidence exists that some women chose to stay behind in Mexico and other wives made up their minds to go at the last minute.

[6] Antonia I. Castañeda, "Presidarias y Pobladores: Spanish-Mexican Women in Frontier Monterey, Alta California, 1770-1821," (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1990), 2.

[7] Ibid., 153; Hernández, "Three Spanish California Settlement Schemes," 205; Frances R. Conley, "Martina Didn't Have a Covered Wagon: A Speculative Reconstruction," The Californians: The Magazine of California 7 (1 March 1989): 48.

land grants.[8] The Rivera y Moncada expedition started out in 1781; among its members were fifty-nine women who were traveling away from their only homes to an unknown, often hostile frontier.[9]

Other women traveled by sea. The Lorenzana orphans, a group of single girls, were sent as potential wives for lusty soldiers.[10] One woman, María de Jesús Torres Lorenzana, chosen against her wishes, made a personal request to the viceroy that she and her sisters be allowed to stay in Mexico. Realizing that she could be forced to go, she decided to hire on as a nurse for the other children.[11] Some of these women, upon seeing the difficulties of life on the frontier "did not want to receive suitors because they did not want to be burdened with marriage."[12]

Other Spanish-Mexican women came by request. Often, a convict could escape a prison sentence if he promised to settle the frontier. His chances of a judge agreeing to this option improved if he took a wife and marriageable daughters with him. Some wives pleaded with judges to set aside a husband's conviction and promised to go north with him.[13]

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[8] Conley, "Martina Didn't Have a Covered Wagon," 48-54.

[9] Castañeda, "Presidarias y Pobladores," 163; Hernández, "Three Spanish California Settlement Schemes," 205.

[10] Ibid., 206. A few boys were also among the orphans.

[11] Ibid., 213.

[12] Castañeda, "Presidarias y Pobladores," 172.

[13] Ibid., 193; Hernández, "Three Spanish California Settlement Schemes," 206.

Upon arrival women found life in the missions and presidios challenging. Housing facilities were overcrowded. Missions located too near the ocean often lacked a convenient fresh water supply. Mission residents lacked fresh vegetables to eat and the highly salienated land produced meager crops. No public hospital existed and only one doctor served for four presidios.[14] Women successfully fended for themselves, learning from the natives what local vegetables and herbs were good for cooking and treating illnesses.[15] Diego Borica, Governor of California, praised the women for taking care of ranches, fields and gardens while husbands were away.[16]

Women also took an active interest in learning and teaching others. Apolinaria Lorenzana learned to read in Mexico. Once in California she taught herself to write and then went on to teach many others. Apolinaria, never married, became a much valued nurse and healer, helping women heal from the symptoms of syphilis and measles. She also taught domestic skills to converted Indian children at the mission in Monterey. Later, she was given the keys to the mission stockrooms and was responsible for the distribution of rations.[17] María Ramona Noriega taught her eleven children, one stepchild and her neighbors' children to read and write. She also helped soldiers become literate in order to

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[14] Castañeda, "Presidarias y Pobladores," 206.

[15] Ibid., 210.

[16] Hernández, "Three Spanish California Settlement Schemes," 209.

[17] Castañeda, "Presidarias y Pobladores," 217-19; Hernández, "Three Spanish California Settlement Schemes," 224.

receive promotions.[18] Eulalia Perez was the mother of twelve, the mission cook and supervised the making of all clothing for the mission. She was also "the best midwife around."[19]

Latina women not only assumed an active role in community life, they also stood up for their rights in the face of discrimination and inequity by actively using the courts to defend their social and financial standing. In New Mexico, Juana Arguello sued María de Benavides for defamation of character. [20] María de Castro used her power of attorney to transfer her personal estate to her husband when she became ill.[21] Ana María Ortíz petitioned and received control of her husband's estate after he was incapacitated.[22] Juana Martín filed charges of adultery and neglect against her husband. He was spending his soldier's wages on another woman. Juana needed her share to feed herself and her children.[23] Often women did not file, not because they were indifferent or accepted immoral behavióor, but because the husband's punishment was often temporary exile. The wife was left to support her children alone.[24] On other occasions, women's protection

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[18] Castañeda, "Presidarias y Pobladores," 218.

[19] Ibid., 221.

[20] Ibid., 147.

[21] Ibid., 149.

[22] Ibid., 151.

[23] Ibid., 155.

[24] Ibid., 156.

was limited. Men accused of adultery or murder often received lighter sentences due to the severe shortage of needed settlers on the frontier.

In California, in 1840, María Rita Valdez de Villa was granted sole title to her 4,500 acre *rancho* by Governor Juan Alvarado. María Rita had taken Luciano Valdez to court to sue for control of this estate.[25] Victoria Reid, an Indian woman, was granted title of Rancho Huerta de Cuati by the Mexican government.[26] Josefa Romero de Castro acquired Rancho Animas in 1835. Antonia Chaboyo was granted Rancho Yerba Buena in 1839.[27] María de la Soledad, Joaquin Sepulveda, María de Jésus García, and Dona Josefa Cota de Nieto all went to court to protect their land claims following the Treaty of Guadalupe Hildago that gave the northern half of Mexico to the United States.[28]

Beginning in 1848 the surge of Anglo settlers, seeking their fortune in gold, completely transformed the pastorial society of Mexican California. By 1890 Mexican Americans were outnumbered by Anglo settlers ten to one and had lost most of their land titles and political hegemony.[29] By 1900 most Mexicans had become laborers living in Spanish speaking barrios. Their children attended segregated schools.[30] Immigration from

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[25] Gloria Ricci Lothrop, "Rancheras on the Land: Women and Property Rights in Hispanic California," Southern California Quarterly 76 (Spring 1994): 62.

[26] Ibid., 63.

[27] Ibid., 67.

[28] Ibid., 67-73.

[29] James S. Olson, The Ethnic Dimension in American History, 2d ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994), 208.

[30] Ibid., 212.

Mexico to the United States increased after 1880 and peaked between 1910 and 1930. Industrial expansion in the Southwestern United States created an enormous demand for cheap labor that attracted many Mexicans experiencing economic and social difficulties caused by the Mexican Revolution. All told, approximately ten percent of Mexico's population migrated to the United States between 1910 and 1930.[31] Mexican barrios expanded rapidly. Living conditions were crowded and often unsanitary[32] Women made up almost half of the immigrants.[33]

Latina women continued to act out against unfair labor practices and the mistreatment of Latinos in general.[34] Most of the Latina women who settled the northern frontier of New Spain and Mexico fought for control of their lives alone. As larger industries developed in the new American Southwest, Latina women found that it was necessary to fight back in unified groups.

In the early 1900s, Latina laundresses in El Paso, Texas made $5-6.00 a week compared to $17.00 for white laundresses. The El Paso laundresses strike by Latinas was

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[31] George F. Sanchez, "'Go After the Women': Americanization and the Mexican Immigrant Woman, 1915-1929," in Unequal Sisters: A Multicultural Reader in U.S. Women's History, ed. Ellen Carol Dubois and Vicki L. Ruiz (New York: Routledge, Chapman & Hall, Inc., 1990), 251.

[32] Ibid., 252.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Clementina Durón, "Mexican Women and Labor Conflict in Los Angeles: the ILGWU Dressmakers' Strike of 1933," Aztlán: International Journal of Chicano Studies Research 15 (Spring 1984): 145-46.

organized to protest such discrimination.[35] In the 1950s in Arizona, Latina women formed auxiliaries to support Mexican husbands on strike against the copper mines.[36]

In Southern California in the 1920s and 1930s, a period of increased labor unrest, many Latina women, skilled in the traditional needle crafts, sought out work in the garment industry as an escape from family domination. Others used needle work to help support their families. Many found that the working conditions left much to be desired and unions were one of the few places where they were treated respectfully, almost as equals.[37] The International Ladies' Garment Workers Union appointed six Latina women to leadership positions, though not high-status officer positions, and went out on strike in 1933 in protest against the plight of garment workers in Los Angeles.[38]

Latina women have traditionally been viewed as a source of cheap labor in food processing plants. In the early 1900s, of all food processing workers in California, Latinas were the lowest paid at $5-6.00 per week.[39] In 1945, seventy-five percent of California

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[35] Vicki Ruiz, Cannery Women/Cannery Lives: Mexican Women, Unionization, and the California Food Processing Industry, 1930-1950 (Albuquerque, New Mexico: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 25.

[36] Margaret Rose, "From the Fields to the Picket Line: Huelga Women and the Boycott, 1965-1975," Labor History 31, no. 3 (1990): 273.

[37] Durón Clementina, "Mexican Women and Labor Conflict," 152.

[38] Ibid., 159.

[39] Ruiz, Cannery Women, 45.

cannery workers were women and cannery workers in California represented twenty five percent of the food processing workers in the United States.[40]

In 1938 Latina women were welcomed into the ranks of the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA), an organization dedicated to improving the working conditions of farm and food processing workers.[41] Monica Tafoya, Angie González, Emma Tenayucca, Luisa Moreno, Marcella Ryan, Dorothy Ray Healey, and Elizabeth Sasuly, all assumed positions of leadership and played an important role in the organization of women and minority workers in the United States.[42]

Most Mexican American workers resented economic inequality more than political discrimination.[43] Union organization was attractive, especially in agriculture where perishable crops made strikes against large agribusinesses effective.[44] Latinas have been active in the United Farm Workers Union (UFW) cofounded by Dolores Huerta and César Chávez.[45] In the 1960s and 1970s the UFW recruited Latina women from rural

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[40] Ibid., 24.

[41] Ibid., 42.

[42] Ibid., 45.

[43] Olson, The Ethnic Dimension, 218.

[44] Ibid.

[45] Rose, "From the Fields to the Picket Line," 271.

communities to organize boycotts in urban areas that brought national attention to the plight of farmworkers, many of whom were Latino.[46]

In 1968 María Luisa Rangel traveled from Fresno, California, to Detroit with her husband and eight children to help organize a boycott against Guimarra, a large table grape producer.[47] In 1970 Juanita Valdez traveled from Salinas, California, to Cincinnati with her husband and seven children to help organize a boycott against lettuce growers. She spoke out at community meetings about the hardships of field work and strike activities.[48]

In 1971 Esther Negrete de Padilla moved with her husband and baby daughter from California to Washington, DC, to help coordinate a lettuce boycott on a national level. Much of Esther's work was carried on behind the scenes as she coordinated welfare and medical benefits for striking workers' families. Esther's college degree and work experience made her a wonderful administrator. She helped formally administer the boycott and lobbied in Washington for labor legislation support.[49]

Despite continual efforts by Latinas to gain economic and social equity for themselves and others, in 1985 the Latino community in California still lagged behind other ethnic groups in economic, educational, and political achievement. Antonia Castañeda's studies of Latina women defined a frontier as "a territory or zone of

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[46] Ibid., 272.

[47] Ibid., 275.

[48] Ibid., 276.

[49] Ibid., 278-80.

interchange between distinct societies--one indigenous and one intrusive to the region."[50] This definition provides the very base of the framework required to examine the role of Latinas in the early Southwest, and it was still pertinent in 1985. In Watsonville, transnational agribusinesses continued to exploit the labor of a group viewed not only as distinct, with its own language and customs, but also, ironically, as "intrusive to the region." The Watsonville Canning Strike of 1985 was not a unique experience in the history of Latinas in the Southwest, it was a continuation of the battle against discrimination and inequity.

Watsonville is located at the northern end of the Salinas Valley in California, one of the most productive stretches of agricultural land in the United States. Situated along the coast of the scenic Monterey bay, the rich soils and mild climate of the valley produce enough broccoli, cauliflower, asparagus, brussels sprouts, carrots, lima beans and spinach to support a large permanent community of agricultural laborers, mostly Spanish speaking migrants from Mexico. In 1985 Watsonville also boasted of being the frozen food capital of the world.[51]

Latinos have a long history in Watsonville. An agricultural community founded in the mid 1800s, Watsonville has almost always been dependent on immigrant labor. Since the 1940s Watsonville has been dependent on workers from Mexico, but most of the

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[50] Castañeda, "Presidarias y Pobladores," 3.

[51] Frank Bardacke, "Watsonville: A Mexican Community on Strike," Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s VV (Guide provided to film: Watsonville on Strike directed by Jon Silver): 149-83.

growth in the Latino population of Watsonville has occurred since the 1960s.[52] By 1985 Watsonville was a prosperous agricultural community with a population of thirty thousand. Approximately sixty percent of the residents were Latino, the vast majority of whom were working class.[53]

In 1985 seven frozen food processing companies existed sprawled out alongside the railroad tracks in a series of single story refrigerated warehouses containing long rows of conveyor belts, steam washers, ovens and freezers. Long rows of workers, mostly Latina women, lined the conveyor belts. Fast, trained hands pared and sliced broccoli buns, trimmed cauliflower or brussels sprouts. The women often stood in puddles of ice cold water and vegetable refuse wearing several layers of clothing to keep warm and hard hats over their hair nets. They worked long days on their feet, doing the same repetitive job, day after day. Every two hours, as OSHA safety regulations required, they shifted positions on the line. Mostly it was just a different spot on the same line doing the same thing: sorting, cutting, or packing frozen vegetables.[54]

Since 1976, Watsonville Canning and Frozen Foods, Inc. and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, Inc., the two largest frozen vegetable processors in town, had been heated rivals for control of the United States frozen vegetable market. In their attempts to undersell each

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[52] Paule Cruz Takash, "A Crisis of Democracy: Community Responses to the Latinization of a California Town Dependent on Immigrant Labor" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 1990), 14.

[53] Takash, "A Crisis of Democracy," 23.

[54] Vera Corral, tour of NorCal Crosetti Foods, Inc. for author, 28 November 1994, Watsonville, Ca.

other and grab market share, both companies searched for ways to cut costs and bring finished product prices down. One obvious method was to reduce employee wages and benefits. These wage cuts and lowered benefits, along with deteriorating working conditions and an attempt to break the union altogether forced employees of Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw to go on strike on September 9, 1985.

The Watsonville Canning Strike of 1985-1987 lasted for eighteen months. During that time the mostly Latina strikers and their families experienced many hardships. Some of those who became active leaders in the strike never returned to work in the canneries. Others survived the strike only to return to work for significantly less pay and fewer benefits. All of the women have dedicated their lives to improving the opportunities for their children, a concern they shared with the Latinas who went before them.

CHAPTER TWO

A REVIEW OF THE WATSONVILLE CANNING STRIKE LITERATURE

> Illiteracy is more than a matter of being able to read and write, it's a level of comprehension.[1] - Annie Long

Latina women, long overlooked in the telling of history, are the subject of a recent emergence of historical works attempting to address their unique experiences. The first four works reviewed here are studies of Latina women in the labor force. Several important aspects of Latina labor force participation receive special attention: the long-standing practice of discrimination and stereotyping of Latina women; an analysis of the reasons Latina women enter the work force; and the effect of work culture on the organizing efforts of Latina women.

The second set of materials will examine life in Watsonville prior to the strike. Many of these works, though they do not deal directly with the strike, shed light on the unique experiences of Latinos in Watsonville and set the stage for the difficulties later faced by striking workers. The third set of materials includes works that examine the strike itself from various points of view. There has been very little focus on the experiences of the women who participated in the Watsonville Canning Strike from 1985-1987.

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[1] Annie Long, interview by author, 28 November 1994, Watsonville, Ca., transcript, Norcal Crosetti Foods, Inc., Watsonville. Ms. Long was discussing her impressions of the mostly Latina workers that she dealt with. She was hired on as the Personnel Director for Norcal Crosetti Foods, Inc., shortly after the strike ended.

The first article, "Mexican Women in Los Angeles Industry in 1928," focuses on one of a series of studies done on Mexican Americans in the 1920s.[2] The original unpublished manuscript is in the Bancroft Library in Berkeley, California. Paul Taylor, Professor Emeritus in the Department of Economics at the University of California in Berkeley, edited the original manuscript in 1975 and published this article in 1980. The series of studies carried out in the period 1927-1929 received support from the Committee on Scientific Aspects of Human Migration and the Committee on Population, both part of the larger Social Science Research Council. This study also received support from the California Welfare Commission. The only notes provided are a list of industries visited in 1928 with special notation given for those industries from which payroll information was gathered.

In order to understand the stance of the researchers toward Mexican Americans and women in particular, it is important to note the time period during which this study took place. The 1920s are included in the Progressive Era of California politics. Sincere attempts to assist poor populations of immigrants aimed at Anglicizing their behaviors and lifestyles without regard to individual culture and background. Success was measured in terms of how well the individual imitated a white Protestant lifestyle.

The aims of the study presented in "Mexican Women in Los Angeles Industry in 1928" are to examine which industries employed Mexican women, the reason women entered industry, women's roles and success in industrial work, and the effects of the

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[2] Paul S. Taylor, "Mexican Women in Los Angeles Industry in 1928," Aztlán: International Journal of Chicano Studies Research 11 (Spring 1980): 99-132.

work experience on women's lives and social attitudes. This article provides a good example of a structural approach toward studying a problem: distribute questionnaires, interview, and examine the statistics.

The attempt to analyze and explain changes in individual and group behavior and attitudes as a result of industrial employment is one of the outstanding features of this study. The findings show that different groups, those coming from the upper, middle and lower classes in Mexico, tended to both search out work and react to the work experience differently. The class groupings were also divided by age. Many of the findings are similar to the findings of studies done today. As long as the labor was viewed as temporary it was more acceptable for women to work outside the home. The reasons for going to work - poverty, providing a better home, living independently-all resemble similar findings in Patricia Zavella's Women's Work.[3] Younger women were found to undergo more significant changes than older women in response to their work experience. This was measured in a more pronounced desire to imitate the behavior and dress of their Anglo counterparts, especially to the extent that the new behaviors, such as unchaperoned dating and living on their own, were in direct conflict with the researchers' views of traditional Mexican culture.

Also reflected in the findings, is the extreme racism that the Mexican American and Mexican women faced every day. At one point in the study the authors find that the concentration of Mexican American and Mexican women in the needle trades was due to

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[3] Patricia Zavella, Women's Work and Chicano Families: Cannery Workers of the Santa Clara Valley (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987).

the fact that "all Mexican women were excellent seamstresses" but part of their lack of success was due to the fact that "Mexican women, although good seamstresses, were slow and painstaking, which did not necessarily make them efficient at piecework."[4]

Clementina Durón's "Mexican Women and Labor Conflict"[5] tells the story of Chicana women in the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, specifically their participation in the Los Angeles strike in October of 1933. It challenges two notions. First, that Chicanas could not be organized in the workplace. Second, that Chicanas have not contributed significantly to Chicano labor history. Durón has based her article on primary material-contemporary English (the Los Angeles Times and the Los Angeles Citizen) and Spanish language (La Opinión) newspapers, an autobiography of Rose Pesotta (a non-Hispanic labor organizer) and on secondary works dealing with women's labor and work and California's economic and labor history. She also looked at the original manuscript for Paul Taylor's study, "Mexican American women in Los Angeles Industry in 1928."

Durón does a better job of placing one specific strike within the larger picture of labor protest than she does in looking at these strikers as women. For example, she points out that the strike took place during a period of general labor unrest and union activity. However, specifically women's issues are not discussed and the only mention of their role as laborers within the family comes when she notes that women's wages did not cover the cost of living and that many of them also received welfare to buy groceries. None of their

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[4] Taylor, "Mexican Women in Los Angeles Industry," 126.

[5] Durón, "Mexican Women and Labor Conflict in Los Angeles."

demands as workers reflect the special needs of women as workers, such as childcare or maternity leave. Durón finds the strike did not change working conditions, but did initiate women into the experience of union organizing and confrontation of employers and local officials. However, Durón does not look beyond the strike to see if the experience changed their lives. Similar to Taylor, Durón finds that many of the young women in the garment industry had taken jobs to move away from the traditional family. Durón does not examine the issue directly, but she does outline some factors regarding the effect of work culture on ease of organizing. As is the case in Vicki Ruiz's work, Cannery Women/Cannery Lives, Durón finds that the work conditions were terrible and the unions were an attractive alternative that treated the women with respect.[6] However differences in nationality, race and language were exploited, thus prohibiting the type of cross-culture networking and organizing that Ruiz describes.

Vicki Ruiz's Cannery Women and Patricia Zavella's Women's Work[7] are both monographs examining the lives of Mexican-American Cannery workers in California. Ruiz is an accomplished women's historian who has significantly helped to demystify the role of women in the western United States. A portion of Cannery Women derives from her doctoral dissertation. At the time of her book's publication Ruiz held a professorship in the Humanities in the Claremont Graduate School and Harvey Mudd College.

Ruiz's research for Cannery Women is extensive. Ruiz cites numerous books and articles, dissertations and theses, unpublished manuscripts, government records and

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[6] Ruiz, Cannery Women.

[7] Zavella, Women's Work.

documents, newspaper accounts and extensive oral interviews with the cannery workers themselves, labor activists and other experts in varying aspects of women's history. Her well-rounded sources rely heavily on interviews with only the "significant" actresses in labor leadership and insufficiently on interviews with the more average cannery worker. Ruiz cross-references each point using both oral histories and written documents.

One of the central features of Cannery Women is the development of a "cannery culture"[8] running both intra- and inter-ethnically. Cannery culture emerges out of deplorable working conditions, dictatorial supervisors who created an "us against them"[9] environment, supportive kin networks, segregation within departments and along the assemblyline, and basic common interests both as cannery workers and as women. Secondly, Ruiz argues that the United Cannery, Agricultural, Packing, and Allied Workers of America (UCAPAWA) union uniquely appealed to women and minorities to assume positions of leadership. Together, UCAPAWA and cannery culture successfully combined to gain significant advances in the work conditions of cannery women.

Patricia Zavella is an anthropologist who also did a significant portion of Women's Work as part of her doctoral dissertation. Zavella based her research on extensive oral interviews with a group of twenty-six seasonal women cannery workers. She supports and elaborates her findings through numerous books and articles, based on census records, government reports, newspaper reports, and union records. One serious shortcoming of

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[8] Ruiz, Cannery Women, 32. Ruiz defines "cannery culture" as "an intermingling of gender roles and assembly line conditions, family and peer socialization, and at times collective resistance and change."

[9] Ibid., 37.

her research is that it is too heavily dependent on interviews with a limited group of women who worked in the canneries for at least twenty seasons. Zavella only interviews two women who worked for only one or two seasons. Because these women successfully integrated seasonal cannery work into their lives, their viewpoints on cannery life and work could be significantly biased.

Zavella does a wonderful job of placing the Chicano family within the larger framework of the colonization of the American Southwest and its subsequent creation of a Chicano underclass. She also explores the effects of political developments such as the 1910 Revolution in Mexico on the individuals who migrate to California. Zavella's main argument is that the division of labor traditionally found in the Chicano home, with the woman primarily responsible for the care of the home and family and subordinate to the husband, is carried over into the workplace. Zavella holds that the family is the center of political conflict and that this conflict supporting the segregation of women is carried over into the workplace.

Ruiz and Zavella disagree as to the extent of the development of interracial networks among the cannery workers. Ruiz argues that the deplorable working conditions combined with a common interest as women and mothers overcame cultural and ethnic differences in the creation of a "cannery culture." However, Zavella points out that ethnic conflict and antagonism, based on segregation and competition between the groups for better positions, was encouraged by employers to undermine group resistance. She also finds that the same kin relationships Ruiz uses to argue for ease of organization, may have worked against organized resistance. Many women put up with unfair working conditions

because if they complained an aunt or uncle might lose their jobs too. The fact that the entire family was working at the plant made the whole group vulnerable to individual employer decisions. Zavella instead argues that it was the combined effect of modernizing production processes, creating an industrial work force, and the extended work season that allowed the work force to become stable thus facilitating union participation.

Ruiz and Zavella differ on their views of women's roles in limiting their job choices. Ruiz argues that women were segregated in lower paying jobs and were not given the chance to take better paying, higher skilled jobs, both within the food processing plant and within the job market as a whole. Zavella argues that the women themselves helped create this situation. Zavella finds that the family ideology did not support women taking on full-time, year-round occupations. As long as the work was seen as temporary, just until the husband made some more money, the wife could go out to work. By committing themselves to seasonal work women limited their job options.

Of particular interest for further study is that Durón, Ruiz and Zavella make claims that either working itself or, more specifically, labor union activity increased the women's sense of self esteem and accomplishment.

The next selection of works deals specifically with the unique experiences of Latinos in Watsonville. Dirty Business: Food Exports to the United States, a film produced by Migrant Media and directed by Jon Silver, exposes the difficulties faced by food processing workers in Mexico.[10] It is necessary to understand working and living

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[10] Jon Silver, Director. 1990. Dirty Business: Food Exports to the United States. Directed by Jon Silver. 15 minutes. Migrant Media Productions, Freedom, Calif. Videocassette.

conditions in Mexico in order to understand why many Mexicans chose to migrate to the United States. Additionally, living conditions in Mexico and expectations for the future created the background against which many workers in Watsonville, who had migrated from Mexico, judged their situation.

Many multinational corporations have taken advantage of low wages and weak labor protections in Mexico. Green Giant moved its frozen food processing facility, and four hundred jobs, from Watsonville to Mexico in 1990. Workers in Watsonville were angered, claiming, "we are left with nothing but backaches and twisted fingers."[11] Living conditions for agricultural workers in Mexico, however, deteriorated as agribusiness continued to invest in Mexico.

Wages in Mexico's food processing plants averaged four dollars a day. Workers at Simplot foods in Irapuato could not afford to drink milk every day and rarely could afford meat. They asked for and were denied raises. The union intended to represent them was provided by the company. Workers who discussed unionizing were fired and never heard from again. Children started work early, sometimes as young as eleven, and worked six and seven days a week. They had no access to medical care.

Irapuato also lacked a sewage treatment facility. The plants produced a great deal of unregulated pollution. Thousands of miles of rivers bubbled from the decomposition of animal and human waste in the water. Blood from slaughterhouses ran directly into nearby rivers and streams. Cattle were filmed wading in sewage next to a pump that sucked up water and irrigated the fields that grow crops sent to the United States.

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[11] Ibid.

Many people were sickened by pollution. Workers living near the plants obtain water for cooking, washing and bathing from the nearby rivers. Children experienced constant diarrhea. Worms and parasites were seen in the noses of children as young as six months. DDT and the "dirty dozen," a group of pesticides banned in the United States, were still produced and used in Mexico. Workers complained that the pesticides made them sick to the point of vomiting and fainting while working in the fields.[12] Compared to working and living conditions described in this film, workers at Watsonville Canning were relatively well-off. They made $7.06 an hour and received vacation and sick pay and medical benefits.

I Would Have Told It If I Had a Chance and The Other Side of Main Street provide personal stories of various ethnic residents of Watsonville focusing on life experiences, discrimination, and work.[13] Personal accounts of cannery work, field labor, and Teamster organization were found in the life stories of several Latino residents interviewed.

José Amaro worked in Martinelli's fruit cannery for over twenty years and participated in the vote to establish the Teamsters as a union representing workers in the food processing plants in Watsonville. Amaro notes that life did improve for the workers once the Teamsters began to represent them. The Teamsters set up a pension program

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Pedro Castillo, ed., Watsonville: "I Would Have Told It If I Had A Chance": A Collection of Oral Histories of Ethnic People (Santa Cruz, California: University California, Santa Cruz, 1978); Pedro Castillo, ed., The Other Side of Main Street: A Collection of Oral Histories of Ethnic Peoples: Watsonville, California (Santa Cruz, California: University of California Santa Cruz, 1979).

with Martinelli's for which he was able to qualify. It is Amaro's opinion that after he retired, cannery workers' lives improved further. They earned more money and they worked almost year round. Amaro also notes, however, that the work was very hard and most of the workers were Mexican. A few Americans would try to do the job, but they didn't last very long.[14]

Workers' difficulties with the police also have a long history. Tomás Alejo Ontiveros was working in the strawberry fields surrounding Watsonville when César Chávez organized a strike of fieldworkers. Ontiveros' son was studying to be a police officer. One day, while he was on strike in the fields, the police arrived and began to harass the workers. Ontiveros watched as the police arrested women and hit children. He went home that night and asked his son to quit the police. He did not want a confrontation, his son in a policeman's uniform and he on a picket line fighting for his own survival. His son agreed and went to work with him in the lettuce fields.[15]

Ontiveros also discusses the children. No one cared about the Mexican children. They sat locked in cars in the heat all day while their parents worked. Some suffocated. Some escaped from the car and died in the road. No one said anything. Ontiveros compared it to a cat dying while crossing the road.[16]

Ontiveros also notes that if Americans worked in the fields with the Mexicans, they had a better chance of driving the tractor or doing supervisorial work. Americans made

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[14] Castillo, "I Would Have Told It If I Had A Chance," 36-38.

[15] Ibid., 73.

[16] Ibid.

more money than Mexicans.[17] Similar stories are told of in the canneries. It was American women who were hired as supervisors, not Mexican. Even if the American woman had very little experience, she had a better chance of being promoted to supervisor.[18]

Good Liberals and Great Blue Herons, by Frank Bardacke, is a collection of articles on topics relevant to development in Watsonville.[19] One of the main issues is an extreme housing shortage that drove rents and property values up out of the reach of the average Mexican worker. Additionally, changes in the economy of Watsonville have caused a loss of skilled or at least above minimum-wage jobs to entry level jobs without benefits, displacing a disproportionate number of Mexican workers. Bardacke places Watsonville at the center of several agricultural worker movements in the past sixty years and provides a brief history of the battles fought, including the 1985-1987 Watsonville Canning Strike.

Reading through this collection of articles gives one a feel for the issues affecting the Mexican community in Watsonville. "Our Lady of the Live Oak" tells the story of how, in 1992, Anita Contreras, a leader in the Watsonville Canning Strike, discovered the image of Our Lady of Guadalupe (the Virgin Mary) in an oak tree at Pinto Lake, just outside Watsonville. Many women who visit the site see it as a symbolic tie between

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Fedelia Carrisoza, interview by author, 8 July 1995, Watsonville, Ca., tape recording, home of Fedelia Carrisoza, Watsonville, Ca.

[19] Frank Bardacke, Good Liberals and Great Blue Herons: Land Labor and Politics in the Pajaro Valley (Santa Cruz, Calif.: Center for Political Ecology, 1994).

Watsonville and Mexico where a strong faith in the Virgin Mary exists. The image is also symbolic of the religiosity of the Mexican women in Watsonville. It is mostly women who visit the oak tree, decorating it with momentos of lost loved ones and taking pictures of the Virgin's image in the patterns of the oak. Bardacke claims that it was this kind of religious devotion that gave the Mexican women strikers the strength to see the strike through to the end. He quotes Anita Contreras: "As long as God is in Heaven, I will never give up." Anita also led the procession of hunger-strikers who marched on their knees to the steps of Saint Patrick's church during the wildcat extension of the strike. As she began her march she exclaimed, "I now go down on my knees before God, but I go on my knees before no man."[20]

Two other articles in this collection, "THANKS, But No Thanks" and "THANKS For The Memories, Richard," deal directly with strike issues. Richard Shaw started Together Helping Americans Nationwide Keep Strong (THANKS) as a marketing technique during the strike. He promised to cancel all foreign orders for produce and buy only from American growers. This would alleviate the problem of international competition if all growers agreed to do the same. But Shaw continued to secretly buy bulk frozen broccoli and cauliflower from Mexico. Joe Fahey, active in the Teamsters union and strike activities, caught Shaw personnel unloading produce marked "product of Mexico" and took pictures. Bardacke wrote an article highlighting Shaw's failure to abide

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[20] Ibid., 7.

by his own promise and refuting the argument that competition with Mexico required dropping wages in order to stay competitive.[21]

Bardacke also highlights working conditions in the plants prior to the strike describing foremen who screamed and yelled at the workers throughout the day. Bardacke witnessed Dave Shaw, Richard Shaw's brother, lift one of the workers off the ground and shake him back and forth while screaming in his face. In another incident women workers were informed that they would only be allowed to use the bathroom facilities during official ten minute breaks. A floor supervisor was assigned to watch the bathrooms and keep track of who went in, how often, and for how long. In response, women workers headed out on their official break and refused to return to work until all eighty-five of them had finished using the bathroom. Such practices were described as normal operating procedure within the canneries.[22]

The Trial of Juan Parra,[23] a film directed by Jon Silver and produced by Migrant Media, highlights issues such as racism, terrible working conditions, and systemic discrimination faced by cannery workers in Watsonville. This film is based on scenes from a day of community activism by Latino residents in Watsonville. The day began with a march through the streets of downtown Watsonville. Mariachi bands and traditional Mexican dancers entertained a large audience gathered in the Watsonville plaza. A play,

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[21] Ibid., 21-33.

[22] Ibid., 35.

[23] Jon Silver, Director. The Trial of Juan Parra=La Historia of Juan Obrero. Migrant Media Ed Project, 1985. UCSC.

"The Trial of Juan Parra," followed. Frank Bardacke, a local resident and longtime activist on behalf of the Latino community in Watsonville, wrote the play using the actual events of the trial of Juan Parra.

In early 1981 Juan Parra was fired from his job at Watsonville Canning and faced assault charges. Ken Miller, Parra's supervisor at Watsonville Canning, claimed that Parra had, unprovoked, hit Miller over the head with a broom. Miller was taken to the hospital and required twenty-two stitches. Parra tells a different story. Miller provoked him, screaming and yelling at him on the job, writing him up for poor performance, and threatening to fire him. On the day of the incident, Parra claims that Miller swung at him with his clipboard. Parra was defending himself.

The details surrounding the trial of Juan Parra highlight many of the problems faced by Latino workers at Watsonville Canning in 1985. Ken Miller, like many supervisors, spoke only English. Juan Parra, like most workers at Watsonville Canning, spoke only Spanish. Communication difficulties caused frustration on the job for both Miller and Parra. When Parra approached Teamsters Union officials for assistance, the union representative also spoke only English and mocked Parra's poor English when he attempted to communicate. On the day of the trial, representatives from the Immigration and Naturalization Services (INS) department showed up at the courthouse unexpectedly and arrested three witnesses expected to speak on Parra's behalf. All three were suspected of being in the United States without proper documentation. Rumors abounded that officials at Watsonville Canning had arranged the INS visit. The charges against Juan Parra

eventually were dismissed. Many of the striking workers later would cite a lack of support from their union representatives and fear of the INS as partial causes of their frustration.[24]

The events surrounding the trial of Juan Parra and the large amount of support demonstrated by the Latino community also served as a tool of empowerment. Jose Gallo, interviewed the day of the play in downtown Watsonville noted: "Yes, there is a lot of discrimination and this is why this play is important. They treat us like workhorses and we have just woken up a little bit."[25]

"A Crisis of Democracy,"[26] Paule Cruz Takash's dissertation discussing Watsonville's white community's response to the Latinization of the town, briefly discusses the Watsonville Canning Strike as an empowering experience for the Latino community. Based on her experiences living in Watsonville and conducting interviews with various white residents, Takash makes four conclusions. First, that the recent changes in the ethnic makeup of the United States differ from previous changes because current residents believe that there is an impending change in racial balances. Second, the legitimacy of white-dominated politics has become more difficult to defend as the number of non-whites has grown. Third, the "weight of numbers" (Takash's term) gives legitimacy to minority demands for change. Fourth, world economic changes are a greater threat to the well-

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[24] Enrique Torres, interview by author, 17 November 1994, Watsonville, Ca., transcript, Watsonville, Ca.; Esperanza Torres interview by author, 17 November 1994, Watsonville, Ca., transcript, Watsonville, Ca.

[25] Jose Gallo. As quoted in Silver, The Trial of Juan Parra: La Historia de Juan Obrero.

[26] Paule Cruz Takash, "A Crisis of Democracy."

being of residents in the United States than are changes in the ethnic makeup of the United States. The goal of Takash's dissertation is to examine how changes in world economy, Unites States foreign and domestic policy, dependency on inexpensive non-European labor, and the development of immigrant networks affect United States society.

In order to carry out this examination Takash focuses on how whites have had to change in response to Latinization.[27] Takash narrows the scope of her research by focusing on an historical voting rights case being argued in Watsonville at the same time as the strike was occurring. The MALDEF suit, as it is called locally in Watsonville, challenged Watsonville's district-wide elections on the basis that they denied political representation to Watsonville Latinos. The challenge faced by the Latino community was to overcome the general acceptance of White control of Watsonville affairs. Takash outlines aspects of discrimination faced by Latinos in Watsonville even after they had become over fifty percent of the population. For example, until the mid-1970s the Watsonville Elks Club admitted whites only.[28] Based on an increase in community involvement on the part of Latinos and on their subsequent successes at the polls, Takash argues that the struggle of the strike, in combination with the MALDEF suit simultaneously being argued in the courts, was a lesson in the ability of the Latino community to affect change in Watsonville that was not lost on the participants.[29]

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[27] Takash defines Latinization as the process of becoming numerically dominated by persons of Latin origin.

[28] Takash, "A Crisis of Democracy," 30.

[29] Ibid.

By far, the most comprehensive telling of the Watsonville Canning Strike is to be found in the coverage provided by Watsonville's local paper, the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian (WRP).[30] Many articles in larger or national newspapers covering issues tangential to the strike, but important to the Latino community in Watsonville were reprinted in the WRP, those deemed most crucial to the Spanish-speaking population were often printed twice: once in Spanish and once in English. Topics of interest to the Latino community in Watsonville included César Chávez's attempts to increase the strength of the United Farm Workers union, agricultural income reports, an analysis of how the white minority controlled Watsonville's City Council, changes in the leadership of the Agricultural Labor Relations Board, contract negotiations with the Teamsters preceding the onset of the strike, studies on the effect of illegal immigrants on the California job market, changes in national immigration policies, an analysis of how sewage rate hikes would affect local food processing plants, how imported produce affected local growers, Watsonville's mayor's stance against the activities of César Chávez, the relationship of the Latino community to the INS, Pajaro Valley economic surveys, and security increases at the food processing plants.

The WRP also contained almost daily updates on contract negotiations between Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw and the Teamsters. Daily police reports covering arrests made of strikers and reported violence related to the strike, editorials and opinion pieces stressing support for strikers or plant owners and pleas for nonviolent negotiations

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[30] Watsonville Register-Pajaronian (Watsonville, Ca.), 1 June 1985 - 18 March 1987.

detailed much of the emotional tone in Watsonville through out the strike. Coverage of striker rallies, dances, marches, food and strike benefit distributions, and strike organization meetings kept strikers up to date on organized activities. Watsonville City Council's position on the strike, court decisions affecting strikers' rights to picket, and the effect of the strike on Watsonville's economy and the strikers' families round out a picture of a town consumed by strife.

The twenty-two months from the beginning of contract negotiations with the Teamsters on 1 June 1985 to the end of the strike in March 1987 yield almost two thousand articles printed in the WRP that are either directly related to the strike or deal with issues involving the Latino community (such as national immigration policy). There has yet to be a complete telling of the strike from the Latino community's point of view based on their own stories and the details provided by the WRP. Until this research is done, the story of the Watsonville Canning Strike of 1985-1987 will be incomplete.

The Santa Cruz Sentinel, the largest paper in Santa Cruz County, covered strike activities after the strike had begun with very little coverage of negotiations prior to the onset of the strike. In general, the Sentinel covered the strike from a broader perspective than the WRP. On 21 October 1985 strike related violence was reported to have spread to Santa Cruz.[31] Four days later the Sentinel ran an article discussing concerns faced by Capitola's City Council. Under a mutual aid agreement between Watsonville and Capitola to assist each other in times of need, the Capitola Police Department had provided tactical

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[31] Keith Muraoka, "Strike-related Incident in Santa Cruz," Santa Cruz Sentinel (Santa Cruz, Ca.), 21 October 1985.

teams and backup forces to the Watsonville Police Department, at Capitola's expense.[32] Neither of these topics were reported in the WRP. The Sentinel, however, did not print as many articles on the strike as did the WRP. A sample of articles from 14 August 1985 to 1 November 1985 yields approximately thirty-three articles in the Sentinel compared to two hundred in the WRP for the same period.[33] Additionally, none of the Sentinel articles were reprinted in Spanish.

The only telling of the strike from the Latino Community's point of view is a film, Watsonville on Strike, again directed by Jon Silver and produced by Migrant Media.[34] This film provides live coverage of many behind the scenes activities affecting the decision to go on strike, the issues that were important to the strikers, and the difficulties experienced by the strikers throughout the eighteen month ordeal.

Strikers' difficulties with union officials were graphically illustrated at the beginning of this film. Fred Hime, President of Teamsters Local 912, which represented the striking workers, attempted to oust Migrant Media from the union hall. A Migrant Media representative asked the Mexican members permission to continue filming their activities and they agreed. Fred Hime yelled at the assembled Mexicans in English, "Half of you

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[32] "Mutual-aid Costs Bother City Council," Santa Cruz Sentinel, 25 October 1985.

[33] This comparison cannot be completely accurate as articles found in the Santa Cruz Sentinel were obtained from the files kept by the Librarian at the Sentinel headquarters in Santa Cruz and some articles may have been overlooked. Articles printed in the WRP were obtained by thoroughly searching the microfilm records. The search of the WRP also benefited from hindsight after the strike had been resolved. Articles from the Sentinel were saved as the strike was taking place.

[34] Jon Silver, Director, Watsonville on Strike, directed by Jon Silver, produced by Migrant Media Productions, 65 minutes, Watsonville, Ca., 1989, videocassette.

aren't even members!" A Migrant Media representative translated for the assembly who then began shouting back, "No! We pay $13.00 a month for your salary! This is our place!" Fred Hime then turned to the camera and threatened to sue Migrant Media if they put him on film.

Many women strikers were filmed discussing the difficulties they faced. The lowered wages offered by Watsonville Canning were not enough to support their children. Several women discussed taking their children out of school and sending them out to work so that the family could survive. Esperanza and Enrique Torres were interviewed in their home and discussed their difficulties keeping up with the rent and repairs. The floor of the house was falling in, furniture was strategically placed so that no one fell through, especially the children. Enrique joked, "It's a good thing we have chickens to eat up all the cockroaches."[35]

Watsonville on Strike also offers the closest approximation of an integrated history of the strike. Interviews with plant owners allow them to tell of their own financial difficulties when trying to compete in an international market. Richard Shaw discussed difficulties he faced when Watsonville Canning arranged a contract with Teamsters Local 912 that allowed them to pay workers forty cents an hour less than other food processing plants in Watsonville. Portions of Watsonville City Council meetings were also filmed showing the strikers' attempts to gain support from the surrounding community. Additionally, the strikers' activities throughout the strike are filmed, including demonstrations in the streets of Watsonville, food distributions, committee meetings,

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[35] Ibid.

Christmas parties and finally, the events of the Wildcat Strike that brought the new plant owner to the table to negotiate for medical benefits.

Frank Bardacke, the author of the play "The Trial of Juan Parra" and Good Liberals and Great Blue Herons, also wrote "Watsonville: A Mexican Community on Strike," an article provided as a guide to the film Watsonville on Strike.[36] This article provided a background of the Salinas Valley, the development of the Teamsters union in Watsonville, and an analysis of the strikers' success or failure based on economic factors: wage and benefit levels and number of available jobs.[37] Five months after the strike Bardacke found that the proclaimed victory of the workers in Watsonville was probably false. Their wages were cut by 12 to 17 percent and less than half of the strikers had been called back to work. Bardacke argued that the early defeat of the strikers from Richard Shaw's plant, six months into the strike, and their willingness to return to work for $5.85 an hour, down from $7.06, placed a ceiling on the terms for which strikers from Watsonville Canning could hope to hold out.

Bardacke included a brief history of Watsonville and the Mexican community's role in the development of Watsonville. Bardacke considered a significant development of the strike to be the Mexican community's war against the *Migra*,[38] the first step to successful unionizing in Watsonville. Most of the events in this "war" took place prior to the strike,

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[36] Frank Bardacke, "Watsonville: A Mexican Community on Strike," Reshaping the US Left: Popular Struggles in the 1980s VV (Guide provided to film: Watsonville on Strike directed by Jon Silver): 14-183.

[37] Ibid.

[38] *Migra* is Spanish for INS.

including the trial of Juan Parra, but effectively neutralized the INS as growers were unable to use the INS against the workers.[39]

Bardacke also provided an analysis of the crisis facing the frozen food industry in Watsonville. Yes, Mexico's levels of exports of cauliflower and broccoli to the United States were booming, but the figures were misleading. Mexico did not export prepackaged frozen vegetables. The bulk frozen broccoli and cauliflower had to be repacked, in Watsonville's frozen food processing plants. Thus, Watsonville was not in competition with Mexico for market share. The argument that Watsonville workers must accept wage cuts to stay in competition with plants in Mexico who paid workers $4.00 per day, was false. Bardacke backed up his claim with a very persuasive fact-if Watsonville Canning was facing a shutdown due to competition with Mexico, why did Wells Fargo Bank bail it out? They extended a thirty million dollar line of credit to keep the plant running during the strike.

One crucial aspect of the success of the strike was the inability of Watsonville Canning to convince strikers to cross the picket line. Almost every account of the Watsonville Canning Strike points out that no one crossed the picket line. As Bardacke put it, "over the eighteen months of the strike, not one of the 1000 Watsonville Canning strikers returned to work. . . . No striker scabbed."[40] This solidarity was credited as the main reason why strikers were able to return to work for more than $4.25 an hour and hold out for medical benefits.

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[39] Bardacke, "Watsonville: A Mexican Community on Strike," 159.

[40] Ibid., 169 - 70.

William Segal wrote a series of articles including, "Watsonville Strikers Hang Tough," and "Watsonville: A Fight that Labor Can Win," during the course of the strike. His "Victory in Watsonville" appeared immediately after the strike had ended. This series of articles focused on the strength and unity of the strikers in the face of widespread discrimination and exploitative business practices, claiming that the strike represented a direct attempt by the Latino community to challenge white hegemony in Watsonville.[41] Segal portrayed the strikers as far more militant than the way most of the women interviewed for this thesis described themselves. According to Segal, hundreds of strikers marched through the streets near the plants in defiance of a court injunction limiting picketers to four per corner. When police in riot gear tried to turn the strikers away they shouted back: "Speak to us in Spanish, we don't understand English," and "What are you, Ignorant? You can't even speak our language."[42]

Segal described strikers' organization efforts despite the lack of support received from their own union officials. Gloria Betancourt, a strike leader, insisted, "the top 912 leaders never wanted us to go out on strike in the first place. Once we went out, they did nothing to help us. We've had to organize ourselves."[43]

Segal placed the Watsonville Canning Strike in a larger perspective insisting that strikers were fighting to protect the living standards of workers throughout California. He

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[41] William Segal, "Watsonville Strikers Hang Tough," The Labor Center Reporter Series No. 174. Berkeley, Ca.: Center for Labor Research and Education Institute, (February 1986), n.p.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

notes that other canneries dropped their wages as a result of the strike and new contracts with the Teamsters would allow them to drop their wages even further if the Watsonville Canning strikers returned to work for lower wages.[44] Their low wages and poor contracts lowered the standard of wages and contracts for the working class as a whole.[45]

Segal also outlined the role of Wells Fargo Bank in Watsonville in extending a line of credit to Watsonville Canning. The loan, amounting to eighteen million dollars by November 1986, was seen by many strikers and their supporters as further proof of white dominated interests in Watsonville supporting efforts to break the union at the expense of the Latino labor force.[46] But the Latino community would not back down. Many strikers were changed forever by the experience. Socurro Murillo, a Latina striker, stated, "I used to feel people like Mort Console[47] were superior to me. I thought they were gods. But not any more. I'll never be sorry I went out on strike."[48]

Segal called the end of the Watsonville Canning Strike a "stunning victory" for labor with most of the credit going to the militant rank and file strikers who refused to

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[44] William Segal, "Watsonville: A Fight that Labor Can Win," The Labor Center Reporter Series No. 198. Berkeley, Ca.: Center for Labor Research and Education Institute, (November 1986), n.p.

[45] Ibid.; Segal, "Watsonville Strikers Hang Tough"; William Segal, "Victory in Watsonville," The Labor Center Reporter Series No. 210. Berkeley, Ca.: Center for Labor Research and Education Institute, (April 1987), n.p.

[46] Segal, "Watsonville: A Fight that Labor Can Win," n.p.; Joe Fahey, interview by author, 8 December 1994, Watsonville, Ca., tape recording, Watsonville, Ca.

[47] Mort Console was the owner of Watsonville Canning prior to and throughout most of the strike.

[48] Segal, "Watsonville: A Fight that Labor Can Win," n.p.

cross the picket line. Their determination forced the new owner of Watsonville Canning not only to reinstate medical benefits for the strikers, but also to indiscriminately rehire strike leaders and retain the pre-strike seniority status of workers.[49] Segal may have underestimated the financial crisis in the food processing industry. He sees the strike as a lesson to the labor movement to promote the interests and unity of the rank and file workers and to emulate the militancy of the strikers in Watsonville. Segal insists that the new labor agreement with the Teamsters would provide the basis for a reversal of an industry-wide downward trend in wages. The victory in Watsonville was seen as the first step in re-establishing pre-strike wage and benefits levels.[50] Segal was wrong. Nine years after the strike began, starting wages for workers represented by Teamsters Local 912 were still lower than pre-strike levels.[51] Ten years after the strike began the plant still referred to as Watsonville Canning by long-time workers is shutting its doors.[52]

"Stereotypes about Mexicans in the Mass Media: News Coverage from the Watsonville Cannery Workers Strike, 1985-1987," by Brian Frith-Smith presents a two part analysis of the treatment of Mexicans in the media.[53] The first section provides an

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[49] Segal, "Victory in Watsonville," n.p.

[50] Ibid.

[51] Norcal Crosetti Foods, Inc. Contract with Local 912, General Teamsters, Packers, Food Processors and Warehousemen Union, dated 26 June 1992.

[52] Marianne Biasotti, "Watsonville Plant Shutting Down," Santa Cruz Sentinel, 15 November 1995, A1.

[53] Brian Frith-Smith, "Stereotypes about Mexicans in the Mass Media: News Coverage from the Watsonville Cannery Workers Strike, 1985-1987," Senior Thesis, University of California, Santa Cruz, 1993.

overall review of the national media treatment of Mexicans. The second section analyzes specifically the treatment of Mexican women strikers in Watsonville during the eighteen month strike.

Frith-Smith's review of secondary works on the treatment of Mexicans in the media draws several conclusions. In the news Mexicans were portrayed most often as criminals. Media stereotypes of Mexicans as violent diverted attention away from the difficulties Mexicans faced when dealing with both the INS and the local police. Even the names of events were biased against Mexicans. Frith-Smith insisted that the Zoot Suit Riots should have been called the U.S. Navy Riots and the East Los Angeles Riots should have been named the Police Riots.[54]

The second section of "Stereotypes about Mexicans" presents an analysis of articles, primarily from the WRP, on the Watsonville Canning Strike. Frith-Smith obtained copies of the articles from local Watsonville activist and the director of films Dirty Business, The Trial of Juan Parra and Watsonville on Strike, Jon Silver, who asserted that his collection of articles represented about eighty percent of the articles published on the strike. Of this number, Frith-Smith picked 217 articles, not including police reports, that dealt directly with the strike. Frith-Smith finds that even though approximately eighty percent of the strikers were Mexican women, Mexican workers were not often the subject of the articles nor were they frequently quoted.[55]

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[54] Ibid., 17.

[55] Ibid., 27.

The strikers were portrayed as passive "poverty stricken victims" or "simple bucolic people."[56] Only 2.3% of the articles identified the strikers as Mexican-American women. The strikers were not, however, portrayed as violent. Frith-Smith finds that articles discussing the violence of the strike most often did not name the ethnicity of the persons involved, except when directly discussing striker vs. strikebreaker confrontations.[57] Many articles in the WRP discussed the cost of the strike to the City of Watsonville, Santa Cruz County, and local business. Frith-Smith found that Mexican strikers were generally blamed for the cost of lost business both to the processing plants and local business. Strikers were also blamed for the increased cost of policing picketing areas and strike activities.[58] Overall Frith-Smith argues that the omission of Mexican accomplishments and the focus on stereotypical roles for Mexicans helped "legitimize a low economic and social status" for all Mexicans in the United States.[59]

Although there has been a recent increase in the number of scholarly works being published on the experiences of Latinos and other underrepresented groups in the United States, an integrated history of the Watsonville Canning Strike has yet to be written. Nothing has been written on the experiences of the Latina women who participated in the strike. Subsequent chapters of this thesis will attempt to address this shortcoming.

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[56] Ibid., 31.

[57] Ibid., 38-39.

[58] Ibid., 39.

[59] Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

THE 1985 STRIKE DECISION BY MEMBERS OF TEAMSTERS LOCAL 912

Yo creo que más bien la razón por la que salimos la huelga fue que nos bajaron el sueldo y los beneficios, verdad?, y entonces, pues, era un sueldo muy bajo y la vida esta muy caro para vivir con ese sueldo, y más bien eso fue lo que causa la huelga.[1] - María Barajas

It's a God-awful way to make a living. - Annie Long[2]

On Monday, 9 September 1985[3] over one thousand food industry workers from Watsonville's two largest frozen vegetable processing plants went on strike. Watsonville Canning and Frozen Foods, Inc. and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, Inc., were in heated rivalry for control of the United States frozen vegetable market. Located in Watsonville, California, both companies purchased from the same produce growers, paid the same sewage and utilities companies, shared access to the same transportation network to move their products, sold to the same markets, and dealt with the same labor union, Teamsters Local 912. In 1985 they also shared the effects of a ten year frozen vegetable market

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[1] I think that the main reason we went out on strike was because they lowered the wages and the benefits. Then, well, it was a low wage and life is too expensive to live on this wage, and this is what caused the strike. María Barajas, interview by author, 18 October 1995, Watsonville, Ca., tape recording, Norcal Crosetti Foods, Inc., Watsonville, Ca.

[2] Annie Long interview.

[3] This date represents the first day employees picketed instead of working. Employers were informed of the strike decision on Saturday, 7 September 1995, by officials of Teamsters Local 912.

stagnation within the United States. Competition between the two was fierce. In their attempts to undersell each other and grab market share, Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods had to find ways to cut costs and bring their finished product prices down. One way to lower costs was to reduce employee wages and benefits.

Workers, mostly Spanish-speaking Mexican and Mexican-American women, felt squeezed. They had accepted a wage cut in 1982 when employers claimed that wage reductions were necessary to stay in business. Yet workers, who had not received a raise since the 1982 reduction, watched as Watsonville Canning invested in newer, improved, automated equipment that replaced human personnel.[4] Throughout the summer of 1985, wage cuts, lowered benefits, stressful working conditions and an attempt to break the union altogether forced employees of Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, Inc. to fight back and on 9 September 1985, they chose to go on strike.[5]

Events in Watsonville in the summer of 1985 must be understood as part of a larger picture of industry stagnation, changing labor relations in the United States, and increasing worldwide competition. The frozen food industry, a byproduct of the food canning industry, grew at a rapid rate after World War II. The boom lasted until 1975,

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[4] Enrique Torres interview.

[5] Representatives of Watsonville Canning or Richard Shaw Frozen Foods have never to my knowledge admitted to attempting to break the union. Much evidence, however, provides a strong basis for such an assumption. One of the offers made to workers during negotiations prior to the strike contained a condition that the plant be non-union. Watsonville Canning also stopped deducting union dues from employee paychecks prior to the strike. Additionally, the belief on the part of all persons interviewed to date, and their holding of this belief prior to the strike, that Watsonville Canning desired to break the union allows this assumption to be made.

when several factors contributed to industry stagnation. Transportation methods improved along with increased exports from developing countries, bringing better quality and less-expensive fresh fruits and vegetables to the market throughout the year. In addition, real wages in the U.S. began to fall and families compensated in part by eating fewer vegetables, fresh or frozen. Overall, the industry that boomed from a per capita consumption rate of 2.2 pounds in 1944 to 20 pounds in 1975 stagnated and grew to only 23 pounds in 1985. Even that small growth is misleading. Institutions such as jails, schools, hospitals and the military increased their use of frozen foods. The product leading this growth in sales, however, was frozen French fried potatoes, not frozen vegetables.[6]

Industry response to stagnation had been threefold. After 1976, construction of new plants ceased. There was an increased investment in labor saving machinery that was expensive to purchase and install, but saved money in the long run. Third, it became cost effective to purchase imported frozen vegetables in bulk from Mexico, then reprocess and pack them here in the U.S. Figures for the increase in imports from Mexico of broccoli and cauliflower to the U.S. went from 1976 levels of 4.8 and 8.3 percent of the U.S. domestic market to a respective 21.9 and 27.1 percent in 1985. In addition, industry giants, throughout the decade preceding 1985, were able to purchase large freezers and store excess product for later sales.[7]

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[6] Frank Bardacke, "Watsonville: A Mexican Community on Strike," 160.

[7] Ibid., 161.

Labor relations within the United States were also taking a seemingly employer-friendly turn. On Labor Day 1985, just days before the outbreak of the strike in Watsonville, at the 39th annual Catholic Labor Day breakfast in Los Angeles, several speakers blamed President Ronald Reagan for stacking the national Agricultural Labor Relations Board (ALRB) with employer-friendly appointees. Alan Kistler, director of organizing for the national AFL-CIO, announced, "if they [anti-union forces] want war, then it is war they will get." He encouraged workers to fight again to defend themselves and their right to organize. AFL-CIO president, Lane Kirkland, charged that "unfair employers who have never given up the dream of total control over the lives of workers have been reasserting their 'right' to rearrange wage levels and redefine working conditions as they alone see fit." Such statements won standing ovations from the audience.[8]

Prior to the strike, agricultural labor relations in California were also strained. Governor George Deukmejian's new appointment to (ALRB) was general counsel Dave Stirling.[9] Stirling was no friend to the worker. Fewer complaints against growers were issued under Stirling and according to César Chávez, a labor organizer for agricultural workers, the Deukmejian administration was not fully enforcing the 1975 law for farm workers' rights.[10] Farmworkers and food processing workers shared many of the same

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[8] "A Militant Tone This Labor Day: 'If They Want War, They'll Get It,'" Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 3 September 1985, 1-2.

[9] "Chavez Calling Attention to Union," ibid., 10 June 1985, 1.

[10] "Chavez Leads Picketing in SF," ibid., 11 June 1985, 17.

labor concerns. Often husbands worked in the fields and wives in the processing plants.[11] Even the ALRB disapproved of Stirling's representation of a farm worker who wanted to organize anti-union elections.[12] By the end of July 1985 the area director for the ALRB in Salinas, Lupe Martinez, who had been with the agency for eight and a half years, resigned. Martinez and Stirling disagreed over enforcement of labor laws and in the end Stirling removed much of Martinez's power.[13]

In the summer of 1985, César Chávez organized twenty-five events statewide to increase awareness of the United Farm Workers union (UFW).[14] Chávez was also reviving the table grape boycott to protest UFW's inability to renew farm contracts with several growers.[15] In July, Santa Cruz Mayor Mardi Wormhoudt marched with the UFW and even declared the day "UFW and Grape Boycott Day," causing the Farm Bureau to call for a boycott of Santa Cruz. But shortly afterwards in Watsonville, when Mayor Ann Soldo spoke at the 52nd annual meeting of the Santa Cruz County Farm Bureau, she

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[11] Rosario Ramírez, interview by author, 18 October 1995, Watsonville, Ca., taped record, Norcal Crosetti Foods, Inc., Watsonville, Ca.

[12] "ALRB Opposes Lawyer's Work," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 25 June 1985, 5.

[13] "Salinas ALRB Boss Quits Over Differences," ibid., 26 July 1985, 2.

[14] "Chavez Calling Attention to Union," ibid., 10 June 1985, 1.

[15] "Chavez Lead Picketing in SF," ibid., 11 June 1985, 17.

clearly aligned herself on the side of employers. She was wildly cheered as she announced that she would never march with César Chávez. [16]

Processing plant owners in Watsonville claimed increasing competition from Mexico was affecting the frozen vegetable industry in the United States, making it difficult for them to compete in a national marketplace. As the U.S. economy increasingly integrates into an expanding world market with goods from the U.S. for sale abroad and fast-improving goods from other countries available at home, the difference between worker standard of living in the U.S. and that of workers in competitive countries becomes an issue of product cost. Although it is not the only difference between the cost of processing food in the U.S. and specifically, Mexico, it is one cost that an employer can adjust without actually relocating the plant.

The food manufacturing industry in Watsonville is a case in point. Two of Watsonville's biggest crops were broccoli and cauliflower. In 1985, frozen food employers in Watsonville blamed imports from Mexico for necessitating the lowered wage and benefits offered in new labor contracts. In 1986, workers on Mexican farms and in food processing plants in Mexico earned significantly less than U.S. workers-$4.00 a day and less.[17] It is unlikely that they earned more than this in 1985. This argument, however, can be misread. Much of what is grown in Mexico is frozen and recapped in the U.S.,

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[16] Elizabeth Schilling, "Mayor Soldo Says She'll Never March with Chavez," ibid., 29 July 1985, 1.

[17] Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 163.

requiring a U.S. labor force.[18] The true losers in this case are the U.S. growers and farm workers, not the food processors. Further rebutting the claims of Watsonville employers that they were in competition with Mexico is the fact that Mexico did not produce all of the various products being processed in Watsonville. Other crops grown in the Salinas Valley included asparagus, brussels sprouts, carrots, lima beans, and spinach.

Additionally, the local Watsonville paper was able to report in June that agricultural profits were up and that the gross value of agriculture for the region had increased by seven percent from 1983 to 1984. Tourism was also on the rise, by thirteen per cent for the same period.[19] Tourists usually increased the local demand for frozen vegetables by eating out at local restaurants.

The frozen vegetable industry in Watsonville was not immune to worldwide, national, and local changes. Food manufacturing companies in Watsonville had spent the decade preceding the strike honing their competitive edge in an expanding market that grew to include products from Mexico, Oregon, and Texas, where processing costs were significantly lower and labor was non-union. In addition, Richard Shaw, once an employee of Mort Console, owner of Watsonville Canning, started up his own company in 1976, while the market was still believed to be growing. Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, Inc. became a direct competitor with Watsonville Canning, providing exactly the same

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[18] Ibid., 162.

[19] Elizabeth Schilling, "Agricultural Income Increases 7 Percent in SC County," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 20 June 1985, 13.

product to the same market.[20] Even with a second major frozen vegetable processing plant in town, industry stagnation over the next ten years cost the Salinas Valley an estimated nine thousand jobs.

Just five days before the strike broke out, the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian ran a front page article arguing that food processing plants in Watsonville could not compete with plants elsewhere in the United States due to the higher expenses of doing business in California. The three items costing more in Watsonville than in other places in the U.S. were water, power, and labor. In 1985, Watsonville needed to upgrade its sewer plant. Large processing plants were already paying an average of $8,000 a month and in order to fund the improvement project would have to pay an additional $24,000 a year in sewage rates.[21] This represented a twenty-seven percent rate increase for processors who were facing a strike threat by workers demanding higher wages.[22] Watsonville's electricity costs were quoted as having increased 600% over the previous ten years. According to newspaper reports, two thirds of California's other food processing plants were non-union and in Texas no one at the six plants processing broccoli was paid above minimum wage ($4.25 an hour).[23] Still, in 1985, the frozen food industry in Watsonville was the largest

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[20] Joe Fahey interview; Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 163.

[21] Steve Stroth, "Watsonville Facing Sewer Rate Hike," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 25 July 1985, 13.

[22] "Higher Sewer Fees for Processors," ibid., 27 August 1985, 11.

[23] Kathy Salamon, "Tough Time for Food-processing Industry," ibid., 4 September 1985, 1.

frozen vegetable producer in the United States and its major competition was with other processors in Watsonville.[24]

In 1982, Watsonville's frozen vegetable processing industry was represented by Watsonville Canning, Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, and J.J. Crosetti.[25] Green Giant also operated a processing plant in Watsonville, but offered a slightly different product by providing mixed vegetables. Food processors in Watsonville had long ago taken several steps to level the local playing field. Forming the Frozen Food Association back in the 1950s, they entered into a Master Agreement that coordinated the payment of identical wages and benefits to workers at all the Watsonville frozen food processing plants. The association bargained collectively with Teamster Union Local 912, also formed in the 1950s. In 1982, Teamsters Union Local 912 represented more than six thousand frozen food industry workers. This was Santa Cruz county's largest workforce.[26] The Master Agreement entered into between the frozen food processors eliminated competition among the companies based on labor costs; everyone provided equal pay and benefits. Since they all also dealt with the same banks, purchased raw products from the same local growers, sold to the same markets, and used the same transportation system, the playing

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[24] "Frozen Food Workers Vote to Sanction Strike," Santa Cruz Sentinel, 14 August 1985.

[25] Elizabeth Schilling, "Threat of Strike at Shaw's," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 5 July 1985, 1.

[26] Elizabeth Schilling, "Food Plant Negotiations - Nobody's Talking," ibid., 6 September 1985.

field was relatively level.[27] Competition existed in the form of production efficiency and marketing skill.

In 1982, the thirty year old Master Agreement was broken and the playing field thrown off balance. Under the pressure of a stagnating market and increasing local competition, Watsonville Canning, the largest of the seven major frozen food processors in Watsonville with two thousand employees, broke from the Master Agreement and lowered basic wages by forty cents an hour. This dropped basic wages from the industry standard of $7.06 an hour to $6.66. Richard King, Secretary-Treasurer of Teamster Local 912, who represented the workers at all the processing plants in Watsonville, was also a long time friend of Mort Console, owner of Watsonville Canning.[28] King's position within Teamsters Local 912 was based on years of an employer-friendly "you scratch my back, I'll scratch yours" relationship.[29] Thus, the leadership of Teamsters Local 912 failed to mount a challenge opposing the wage reduction in 1982. That failure opened the door to further wage and benefit reductions that eventually culminated in a strike by over one thousand workers.

The threat of a strike by Teamster's local 912 became apparent by early July 1985. The three year labor contract entered into in 1982 between the Frozen Food Employers Association and local 912 expired on 30 June 1985. During that time Watsonville Canning

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[27] Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 163.

[28] Ibid., 165; Fahey interview, 8 December 1994; Schilling, "Threat of Strike at Shaw's," 1.

[29] Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 165.

had made full use of its wage advantage. Frozen broccoli was processed, even if there were no orders for it.[30] Watsonville Canning was hoping to outsell its competitors, with a less expensive product, and grab as much market share as it possibly could. Watsonville Canning also used the opportunity to prepare for the future. Almost one million dollars was invested to expand and modernize the plant.[31]

The strike that began on 9 September 1985 was a result of several months of failed contract negotiations between Teamsters Local 912 and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods and Watsonville Canning. Teamsters Local 912 entered into negotiations asking for a thirty percent wage increase over the next three years.[32] Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, which had been paying relatively higher labor costs over the past three years, wanted wage parity if not a wage advantage over Watsonville Canning. The Frozen Foods Employers Association, which also included fruit processing plants Del Mar, Smuckers and New West, was waiting to see what the results of these negotiations would be. All of the other frozen food processors in the area were ready immediately to drop their wages to the lowest level agreed to by the Teamsters with either Shaw or Watsonville Canning. From Teamsters Local 912's point of view, a strike may have been the only way to control

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[30] Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 163.

[31] Ibid., 163.

[32] Elizabeth Schilling, "Frozen Food Talks Resume," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 9 July 1985, 2.

falling wages as Shaw and Watsonville Canning each successively dropped their wages lower than the other's latest offer.[33]

The 1985 labor contract with Teamsters Local 912 would set the stage for the next three years' competition. Every three years, while the contract was renegotiated, talks regularly ran beyond the term of the old contract. Usually, the old contract was merely extended on a week by week or month to month basis until a new deal had been arranged between the employers and the Teamsters.[34] This time, however, Richard Shaw Frozen Foods, threatened by further separate negotiations with Watsonville Canning that it feared would continue the unfair wage rates, took the initiative to drop wages. Exercising its option to cancel the old contract with seventy-two hours notice, Shaw used the Fourth of July weekend to put a new contract, at Watsonville Canning's lower rates, into effect. Without official union negotiating, Shaw's basic wages now matched Watsonville Canning at $6.66 an hour. Vice President of Shaw Frozen Foods, Steve Shaw, explained that as long as the wage disparity existed, the company had been losing money.

However, in what is widely believed to be an all-out attempt simply to bust the union altogether, Shaw's unofficial contract also lowered wages for new-hires by more than $2.00 per hour, included fewer holidays, and remodeled the seniority system, taking away job security from long-time workers.[35] Richard King, Secretary/Treasurer of

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[33] Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 164.

[34] Enrique Torres interview.

[35] Ibid., 17 November 1994; Fahey interview, 8 December 1994; Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 150.

Teamster local 912, noted that the new contract offered by Shaw was a return to conditions of thirty years previous; everything the union had gained since the 1950s was lost.[36]

The remodeled seniority system was of crucial importance to the workers. Vegetables were processed when crops arrived, whether it was five in the morning or six at night. Employees had to be available at a moment's notice when a crop arrived.[37] Since the employer called employees to let them know when they were needed for work each time produce arrived, the removal of the seniority system gave the employer significant power over individual employees. The employer could choose to call back favored employees and not call unfavored ones. The seniority system protected employees from unfounded bias by requiring employers to call individuals in the order of seniority. Thus, without an enforced seniority system, an employee seen wearing a union badge, at work or in the community, might not be called back to process the next batch of vegetables. In effect, the removal of a seniority system gave the employer the power arbitrarily to "fire" any employee by simply removing his/her name from the phone list.

On 7 July 1985, three days after Shaw presented its offer, employees at Shaw Frozen Foods voted to reject the company offer and authorized Teamster union local 912 to call a strike. The vote was decisive: 475 to 15. Of interest to note is that John Cohoon, one of the supervisors at Shaw's, spoke out at the union meeting held on 7 July and attended by more than one thousand workers and their family members. He argued

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[36] Schilling, "Threat of a Strike at Shaws," 2.

[37] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

that Shaw Frozen Foods was not out to drive wages down or remove workers' benefits. All Shaw needed was a level playing field. Bring wages at Watsonville Canning up to the wages paid by the six other local processors, and everyone would be satisfied. Whether or not this supervisor spoke for company officials is irrelevant. Of importance is that even at this early juncture, a possible solution to potentially falling wages throughout the Watsonville food processing industry was available.

Instead, Watsonville Canning's subsequent offer held even fewer benefits for employees than Shaw's. In a new contract that included forty-five employee take-aways, existing wages were left at the current rates, on a par with Shaw Frozen Foods. Newhires would be paid $2-3 less per hour. The new offer also reduced the amount of vacation time earned, made it more difficult to get medical benefits, eliminated the guaranteed number of hours of work each day, and most significantly, required workers to be nonunion. Automatic paycheck deductions for union dues ceased. Overall, it was the same contract as that offered by Shaw Frozen Foods. Joe Fahey, active in the Teamsters for a Democratic Union, a dissident faction of the Teamsters that opposed Teamster contracts favoring employers, explained to employees at a meeting held on 11 August that the companies were trying to break the union. Employees voted 551-6 to authorize a strike.[38]

Battle lines were drawn. The Teamsters organized a strike fund of $45 a week per person for the first two weeks and $55 a week for the following weeks of the strike. On

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[38] "Autorizan Huelga Empleados de las Procesadores Locales," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 13 August 1985, 16; Joe Fahey, phone conversation with author, 7 November 1994, written record, Watsonville, Ca.

Sunday, 18 August, union members representing employees of the remaining frozen food manufacturers in Watsonville voted to assess themselves $5.00 a week to support striking workers at Richard Shaw Frozen Foods and Watsonville Canning.[39] Richard King of the Teamsters said that they would not actually walk out until the peak of the processing season, when it would really hurt the companies.

Because Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods had implemented new contracts outside of official negotiations, Teamsters Local 912 also filed charges against both Richard Shaw Frozen Foods and Watsonville Canning for operating under illegal contracts. The National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) dismissed the charges against Shaw Frozen Foods. The charges against Watsonville Canning were still pending in September.[40]

In August 1985, with unofficial contracts in effect lowering employee wages and benefits, a strike was expected. In preparation, Watsonville Canning ran bilingual radio and full page newspaper ads in order to attract specialized laborers. In order to operate at a minimal level during a strike, they would need skilled forklift operators, electricians, and truck drivers. Both Richard Shaw and Watsonville Canning reiterated their argument that nonunion shops, even in Texas and Oregon, were paying employees $.60 to $3.00 less per hour. These cuts were needed in order to stay competitive.[41]

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[39] Kathy Salamon, "Food Workers Approve Strike Fund," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 19 August 1985, 1.

[40] "Shaw Cleared of Charge Brought by Union," ibid., 4 September 1985.

[41] Elizabeth Schilling, "Watsonville Canning Set to Operate During Strike," ibid., 14 August 1985, 1.

Richard Shaw Frozen Foods also took action to avoid a strike. Holding meetings with individual employees, supervisors favorably explained the new contract terms. Employers also tried to undermine the Teamsters union. Watsonville Canning distributed a letter to employees claiming that the Teamsters union had misused employees' funds. Steve Shaw explained it this way, "I think the employees are very confused about what to think. . . . The union has been telling them some 'modified truths,' if you want to call it that."[42] Employees saw this as a further attempt to break the union and did not take claims against the union seriously.[43]

The new unofficial contracts put into place by Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods were almost identical, recreating the level playing field, with lowered labor costs, between the two largest vegetable processing plants in Watsonville. Apparently unsatisfied, in the beginning of September, Watsonville Canning called for an additional thirty percent reduction in the wages of current employees. This would bring basic wages down to minimum wage ($4.25 an hour). To ease the blow, it offered to return mandated union membership and the deduction of union dues out of paychecks. Shaw Frozen Foods then announced that if Watsonville Canning dropped the wages of current employees, it would have to do the same.[44]

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[42] Kathy Salamon, "Tension Growing at Food Plants; Strike Imminent," ibid., 30 August 1985, 1.

[43] Esperanza Torres, interview by author, 4 December 1994, written record, Watsonville, California.

[44] Kathy Salamon, "Food Plant Talks Resume Tomorrow," Watsonville Register Pajaronian, 6 September 1985, 1.

In response, top officials from the International Brotherhood of Teamsters in San Francisco were called in to assist in further negotiations.[45] Negotiations also continued with the four remaining members of the Frozen Food Employers Association. Green Giant, in order to avert a strike of its own workers, had removed itself from the association.[46] Green Giant also advertised for twenty more workers in anticipation of being one of the only processors in town able to continue full scale operations as the peak of the processing season approached.[47]

Meanwhile, as the employers and the union were negotiating, conditions within the plants were creating an atmosphere of repression and resentment that would have a significant effect on the future strikers. From some workers' point of view, the months of abuses by employers during the negotiations caused a level of anger and resentment that was to create a militancy the employers could not match.[48] Tensions grew as the effects of the new contracts were felt. Teamster officials attempted to maneuver as if the expired June 1982 contract was being held over. Employers went out of their way to enforce both old and new regulations.

Payroll departments ceased to deduct union dues from employees paychecks. Two thousand employees from Watsonville Canning now had to go in person to the union

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[45] Kathy Salamon, "Labor Talks Bog Down on New Proposal," ibid., 2 September 1985, 1-2.

[46] Salamon, "Food Plant Talks Resume Tomorrow," 1.

[47] Elizabeth Schilling, "Food-plant Strike Set For Next Week," ibid., 7 September 1985, 1-2.

[48] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

office, whose lobby would comfortably hold approximately seventy people, to pay their dues.[49]

Several Watsonville Canning employees were fired for eating produce at the plants. Previously, employees had been allowed to eat as much produce as they wanted as they stood working along the processing belts. Now employees seen eating the produce were stopped as they exited the building. Employers argued that the employees were stealing company property-concealed in their bellies. Workers saw this as a way to get rid of longtime workers and hire new ones at a cheaper rate. Several of the fired employees had worked at Watsonville Canning for at least ten years, one for twenty-two.[50]

Union representatives Leon Edward Ellis and Sergio O. Lopez were cited for trespassing inside Watsonville Canning. Previously, union representatives were expected to visit the plant on a regular basis to check on working conditions and speak with employees. Under the new contract union representatives were no longer allowed inside the plant unescorted. Additionally, they were no longer allowed to speak to the employees while they were working. The company argued that such activities would distract the workers.[51]

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[49] Kathy Salamon, "Food-processing Talks Continue to Little Avail," ibid., 21 August 1985, 19.

[50] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994; Enrique Torres interview; Kathy Salamon, "Food Workers Approve Strike Fund," ibid., 19 August 1985, 1. This article supports Torres, stating that four individuals were fired, and argues that Watsonville Canning was ridding itself of senior employees (one had twenty-two years of experience) in order to hire less expensive new ones.

[51] "Union Representatives Cited for Trespassing," Watsonville Register Pajaronian, 20 August 1985, 3.

Working conditions also deteriorated. Now production at Watsonville Canning sped up. Previously, workers processing broccoli were expected to cut fourteen buns of broccoli per minute. The new required rate was eighteen to twenty-four. Supervisors stood behind the line workers with watchclocks in their hands, counting the number of broccoli buns each employee cut, reminding them when they fell behind.[52]

No longer could line workers step away to use the restroom. For this necessity, breaks were provided. But under the previous contract even if one extended the written ten minute break to fifteen, no one complained. Food processing plants are purposely built with the rows as long as possible. Building turns into the conveyor belts is expensive and impractical. With bathrooms often located at the very end of the conveyor belts, it often took more than ten minutes time just to get there and back. The six minutes provided under the new contract was not enough. Workers ran.[53]

Tensions began to run so high that several workers quit. Injuries became more common. The faster pace contributed to more frequent cuts of fingers and arms.[54] One of the line workers, Elva Alvarez, filed a police report claiming that her supervisor, in an

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[52] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994; Enrique Torres interview.

[53] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

[54] Esperanza Torres interview, 4 December 1994.

argument over her packing rate, held her hand down along the conveyor belt, causing pain.[55] Employees were anxious for something to change.

On Friday, 6 September 1994, supervisors at Watsonville Canning presented employees with a new chart of wages and benefits officially dropping wages to $4.25 an hour. A last ditch attempt at negotiations between Teamsters officials and Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw Frozen Foods failed. On Saturday, 7 September 1994 the strike was made official.

Months of tension and harassment had created a militancy on the part of the workers, particularly at Watsonville Canning, where tensions were described as worse than at Shaw Frozen Foods. Esperanza Torres and her husband Enrique, both employees at Watsonville Canning were fed up. They spent the Sunday before the strike helping to make picket signs. And when five o'clock Monday morning, 9 September 1985, arrived, the peak of the season for the frozen food processing industry, Esperanza and Enrique stood with hundreds of others in the pitch black of predawn, the rain pouring down. When most food industry employees began their long day standing on their feet cleaning and processing, hundreds stood on the picket line, holding signs that passersby would not be able to read for at least another hour when the sun came up.[56]

The dark rain of the first morning on the picket line may have been an omen of worse times to come. Six months later workers from Richard Shaw Frozen Foods would

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[55] Kathy Salamon, "Tension Growing at Food Plants; Strike Imminent," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 30 August 1994, 1.

[56] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

accept an offer at a basic wage of $5.85 an hour and reduced benefits.[57] They went back to work. The strike at Watsonville Canning would last another year. Watsonville Canning refused to accept a basic wage of $5.85 an hour and strikers would not work for minimum wage.

In February 1987, Watsonville Canning and Frozen Foods, Inc. folded. David Gill, a local grower trying to recoup his own losses from the strike, took over and renamed the processing plant Norcal Frozen Foods, Inc.[58] Gill announced that Norcal would immediately begin hiring, but it would not be a union shop. Strikers refused to work.[59] In a further attempt to gain a competitive edge, Gill offered the strikers a return to work for $5.85 an hour as a union shop but reclassified them as new employees, removing all seniority and more importantly, making them ineligible for any medical benefits for three years. Teamsters officials accepted the offer and officially ended the strike.[60] But workers did not agree. In an unofficial "wildcat" four-day extension of the strike, workers, mostly Latina women fasted, then symbolically marched on their knees to the steps of St. Patricks

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[57] Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 150.

[58] Donald Miller, "Bank Forecloses on Food Packer," Santa Cruz Sentinel, 1 March 1987.

[59] "Strikers Won't Return, Teamster Official Says," ibid., 1 March 1987.

[60] Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 152; Fahey interview.

Catholic Church to publicize their plight.[61] Gill conceded. Medical benefits were reinstated.[62]

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[61] Silver, Jon, Director, Watsonville on Strike.

[62] Bardacke, "Watsonville on Strike," 152; Fahey interview.

CHAPTER FOUR

LATINAS ON STRIKE: AN ANALYSIS OF ACTIVISM

> *Dame a mí la oportunidad de demostrarte que yo, como tu hija mujer, yo también soy capaz o mejor que tu hijo hombre. Y te digo, si yo no te demuestro que soy igual que mi hermano, entonces, sí, métame a la cocina. Pero cuando yo te demuestre que soy igual o mejor que mi hermano, entonces me vas a dar mí respeto como mujer.*[1] - Fedelia Carrisoza

This chapter, which discusses the individual experiences of several Latina women involved in the Watsonville Canning Strike of 1985-1987, is based primarily on interviews with seven women who were involved in the strike against Watsonville Canning. Two of those women did not return to work in the canneries and successfully managed to build careers elsewhere. They were also contacted through persons not involved with the cannery and interviewed in their own homes. Esperanza Torres worked actively to maintain the strike and continued to persuade the Latino community to organize and fight for causes on its behalf. Fedelia Carrisoza moved into the field of education. She continued to work on behalf of Latinos in Watsonville through the group *Humanos Derechos.*[2] In July of 1995 *Humanos Derechos* concentrated their efforts on persuading the Watsonville City Council to make an increase in low income housing a city priority. The

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[1] Give me the opportunity to demonstrate that I, your daughter, I too am as capable or more capable than your son. I tell you, if I cannot prove that I am equal or better than my brother, then send me back into the kitchen. But when I prove that I am equal, you will give me respect as a woman. Fedelia Carrisoza interview.

[2] *Humanos Derechos* is Spanish for Human Rights.

stories of these two women differ markedly from the experiences shared by the women who still work in the cannery today. Torres and Carrisoza are much more willing to share details of strife, difficult working conditions and resistance within the cannery preceding the strike.

Rosario Ramírez, Sara Arredondo, Carmen Vargas, and María Barajas all continue to work for Dean Foods, Inc.[3] Annie Long, Personnel Director for Norcal Crosetti Foods, Inc., arranged for these women to be interviewed at the cannery and on company time. This factor certainly influenced the outcome of the interviews. The fact that these women returned to work in the cannery following the strike was used as a control factor against which to measure the differences between their experiences and those of active strikers who did not return to work in the canneries. Each interview began with an explanation of the research project, the significance of their stories, and importantly, an insistance that no connection existed between this research and Norcal Crosetti or Dean Foods, anyone from Watsonville Canning, or the Teamsters Union. Even under less than ideal circumstances, the women who returned to work at the canneries have an important story to tell.

The women interviewed for this essay had several things in common. All migrated from Mexico looking for work and a better way of life and had worked in the canneries at least five years prior to the strike. Only one, active striker Fedelia Carrisoza, received beyond a sixth grade education in Mexico. All spoke only Spanish although a few understood some English. All but one had at least four children and were caring for small

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[3] Several of these women have chosen to use pseudonyms to protect their privacy. Dean Foods, Inc. purchased Norcal Crosetti Frozen Foods in October 1995. Norcal Crosetti Frozen Foods purchased Watsonville Canning in early 1987.

children during the strike. All were at least thirty years old at the onset of the strike. All had lived in the United States approximately twenty years at the time they were interviewed, but had not yet become citizens, although most of their children were.

All but one of the women interviewed had migrated to the United States from Mexico as part of an extended family. The shared goal was to obtain work. Esperanza Torres remembers when her husband's brother, a field worker, returned to visit from the United States. He drove up in a fancy new car, all polished and shiny. "Everybody in the United States has a car like this," he claimed.[4] Even though Enrique, Esperanza's husband, held a good position on a farm in Michoacan and received lots of "extras," they decided to migrate north. Upon arrival Esperanza and Enrique Torres discovered the truth to be a little different from that touted by his brother. Everybody worked twelve to fifteen hours a day in the fields - and there was no new car.[5] Rosario Ramírez's uncle, a manager on a farm in California, obtained the necessary paperwork for her father and all her brothers and sisters to migrate. Ramírez's mother's family was already in San Jose-all of them. But she left many other poor relatives in Guadalajara.[6]

María Barajas stated the goal most succinctly: "We came to work."[7] Barajas came from a family of ten children in Jalisco. All ten brothers and sisters migrated to California prior to the strike. Most of the sisters and the wives of the brothers worked in the

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[4] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

[5] Ibid.

[6] Rosario Ramírez interview.

[7] María Barajas interview.

canneries in Watsonville. Most of the men worked in the fields in the surrounding Salinas Valley. Barajas was one of the last of her family to migrate. The only family left in Mexico, at the time of the interview, were a couple of cousins.[8] Sara Arrendondo was the only woman who migrated alone. She grew up on a ranch in Michoacan. Orphaned at a young age and later trying to support two young children alone, she moved to Mexicali, a small town on the Mexican side of the U.S.-Mexico border. Poverty there was extreme and she could not afford shoes for her two boys. She crossed the border to California alone and without friends or family to lean on. It would be several years before she could send for her boys.[9]

Most of the women used their extended family connections to obtain work in the canneries. Ramírez's cousins, sisters and sister-in-laws all worked in the canneries and brought her an application. Carrisoza's aunt brought home an application for her. Barajas' and Torres' mothers and sisters worked in the canneries and encouraged them to apply. Five of Carmen Vargas family members worked in the nearby fields and six nieces worked in the canneries and encouraged her to apply. One niece took Vargas to the cannery to introduce her to the supervisor, "move your hands around real fast," the niece insisted, "so she can see that you would be a good worker."[10]

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Sara Arredondo interview.

[10] Carman Vargas, interview by author, 18 October 1995, taped record, Watsonville, Ca.

Sara Arredondo took a much longer route to work in the canneries. She worked for several years as domestic help, living and working in the home of a Watsonville woman. She earned twenty dollars a week and sent as much as she could back to her two little boys in Mexico. After her employer's death, a friend told Arredondo she should apply at the cannery. She did. Arredondo showed the most appreciation for the cannery job. She remembers her first paycheck for $70.84 for one week's work. Soon it was enough to send for her children.

Work in the Canneries required stamina. The hours were long and the job monotonous. Conditions at Watsonville Canning, however, deteriorated in the months preceding the strike and represented an effort on the part of the plant owners to break the strength of the union in Watsonville. Such conditions also increased the militant attitude of the strikers.[11] Of particular interest here is the willingness of those who no longer work for Watsonville Canning to describe in detail not only deteriorating working conditions but also resistance efforts to sabotage production. Those workers still working in the plant, and interviewed on plant premises, were almost uniformly evasive on these topics. When pressed for further details, most simply claimed to have been under "pressure" or "stress."

Esperanza Torres and Fedelia Carrisoza, active strikers who did not return to work at the canneries, were quite vocal about the deteriorating work conditions in the months preceding the strike. The rate of production was increased. Whereas before Torres was required to cut nine heads of broccoli per minute, now she had to cut eighteen and even

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[11] Esperanza Torres interview, 4 December 1994.

twenty.[12] The packing rate was also doubled. Rows of women, often those who were not coordinated enough to cut the produce, filled large boxes with individual packages of frozen product, then shoved the box down the conveyor belt. They worked as fast as they could.[13]

Breaks were shortened, making it difficult to use the restroom facilities. Entire processing lines were given breaks simultaneously and expected to return to their position within ten minutes. With eighty-four or more women working on the same line, it was impossible for everyone to use the restroom and return in ten minutes; there were only three or four stalls.[14] Fedelia Carrisoza recalls at the peak of the processing season, sometimes hundreds of women all sharing one bathroom. She herself rarely bothered with the restroom. It was more important to just sit down.[15]

Restroom breaks for pregnant women were also limited. Shortly after Carrisoza began working at the cannery, she became pregnant with her first child. One day the supervisor called her over and asked, "Fedelia, what's up. You are using the bathroom too much and you know that you shouldn't."[16] Carrisoza continued to step away from her position on the packing line and visit the restroom as needed. Managers continued to harass her. Finally Fedelia became very vocal and offered a direct challenge to her

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[12] Ibid.

[13] Carrisoza Interview.

[14] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

[15] Fedelia Carrisoza interview.

[16] Ibid.

supervisor, "Show me a law that says I cannot go to the bathroom! Do you think that just because we are from Mexico or because we don't have legal documents to work here we do not have the right to use the restroom? Me, and her, and her, and her, all of us. We can all use the restroom!"[17] Many times Carrisoza was sent home early, after she had worked the minimum six hours, while others stayed on processing a new crop.[18]

One day when Fedelia Carrisoza returned from a visit to the restroom, another woman had taken her place on the line. Carrisoza was assigned to a milling machine that she had no experience operating. Even though she was assured that the machine was not dangerous, Carrisoza refused on the grounds that she had seen other women cut their fingers. As a result, Carrisoza was sent home.[19]

There were more injuries as a result of the increased pace.[20] Both Esperanza Torres and Fedelia Carrisoza recall many injuries. Standing in front of the conveyor belts all day, hurriedly chopping vegetables or pushing along heavy boxes of frozen food often caused backpain. Additionally, many of the women were short. Carrisoza, who stood at five foot six inches, was one of the tallest women workers. The height of the conveyor belt increased back pain. Some women stood on boxes, but the icy cold wet floor was slippery. Those women unlucky enough to fall either worked in pain, or could no longer work at all. Law suits against Watsonville Canning for repayment of doctor's bills and lost wages could

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.

[19] Ibid.

[20] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

take years to get through the courts.[21] There were many cut fingers. Esperanza Torres recalls watching at least one woman continue working with one hand while a cut finger was held in the air wrapped in a bandage. Carrisoza insists it was very common. The women often went home the day of the injury, but would have to return to work the very next day in order to retain their seniority status.[22] Torres traces her drive to be active in the strike directly back to her anger at abuses within the plant.[23]

Such anger also led to resistance inside Watsonville Canning. Torres recalled that unnamed individuals tossed nails and screws into the machinery, forcing temporary work stoppages. One day someone shut off the hot water and the broccoli could not be cleaned. Light fuses sometimes disappeared, giving women a short break in the dark while supervisors busied themselves trying to find more. Less directly malicious, and in the spirit of speeding up production, the women sometimes cut the broccoli so fast that it bunched up along the conveyor belts and eventually stopped the line. Then a supervisor or repair man, if one were free, would have to climb up and hand feed the chopped broccoli into the ovens.[24]

Carrisoza also recalled various methods of resistance within the cannery. Many times the women all worked very slowly, frustrating the supervisors. Other times women tossed kernels of corn or orange peels into the spinach as it was being diced. When the

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[21] Fedelia Carrisoza interview.

[22] Esperanza Torres interview, 4 December 1994; Fedelia Carrisoza interview.

[23] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

[24] Esperanza Torres interview, 4 December 1994.

finished product reached the quality assurance department, someone would spot the little bits of corn and orange. Then production was stopped so that the entire spinach line could be inspected and cleaned.[25]

Other times several women in the same line became simultaneously ill. The women bent over holding their stomachs and groaning. Supervisors searched out Alka-Seltzer and explained that it was too late to call other women at home and ask them to come in to work. After about ten or fifteen minutes of rest the workers "recovered."[26]

For Torres, the same frustration that led to anonymous sabotage within the plant fed a fierce dedication to the cause of the strike. Of all the women interviewed she was the most vocal and active. She helped make picket signs the Sunday before the strike started. She actively tried to dissuade strikebreakers from crossing the picket line. Torres also traveled to San Francisco and spoke not only in a university auditorium, but also on television to gather support for the strike. In the early mornings, buses picked up groups of workers from Salinas and escorted them to the plant to work. Torres was in Salinas too, convincing potential strikebreakers not to get on the bus, not to undermine a cause worth fighting for.[27] Her activism also carried a price. In 1991 both Esperanza and her husband, Enrique, needed work and applied at a Salinas plant associated with NorCal Crosetti.

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[25] Fedelia Carrisoza interview.

[26] Ibid.

[27] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

Unfortunately, they were informed that they would not be allowed to work because they were known for their strike activities.[28]

Fedelia Carrisoza was also frustrated by both working conditions and the union's seeming inability to improve conditions for the workers. Recognizing the lack of leadership provided for the employees, she joined Joe Fahey, Esperanza Torres and Enrique Torres in forming the Watsonville branch of Teamsters for a Democratic Union (TDU) a nation-wide dissident branch of Teamsters International dedicated to fighting corruption within the union's leadership. She wanted the union to be more democratic and to work harder on behalf of the workers. She wanted TDU to help push the Teamsters into taking a harder stance against the plant owners and the abusive working conditions. It was this group that was responsible for forming the Strike Committee that coordinated strike support activities and even represented workers at contract negotiation meetings with Teamsters officials and plant owners.[29]

Fedelia Carrisoza credits the Strike Committee with pressuring the Teamsters into supporting the strikers and the strike decision. She did not care for Richard King, Secretary-Treasurer of Teamsters Local 192, or his policies. He agreed that the workers had the right to go on strike, but always warned them that they might lose. Many workers shared this same fear and Carrisoza worked hard to convice them that they had a chance, if they were united. Often it was the workers with the most seniority who had the most to lose and were more wary of risking their jobs. Carrisoza had only worked at the plant for

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[28] Esperanza Torres interview, 4 December 1994.

[29] Fedelia Carrisoza interview.

five years and did not have much seniority. Esperanza and Enrique Torres also had only about seven years of seniority. It took a lot of convincing to recruit others to fight back against the impending wage and benefit cuts. Carrisoza recalls working very hard with the women before the strike, convincing them that they had rights and deserved to be treated with respect.[30]

Fedelia Carrisoza also put her secretarial training to work during the strike. She performed many administrative functions for TDU and the Strike Committee. She also helped produce copies of the union labor contract in Spanish so that the workers could read for themselves what kinds of conditions were negotiated and what the responsibilities of each party were.[31]

Rosario Ramírez, María Barajas, Carmen Vargas, Sara Arredondo, and María Barrazas, passive strikers who returned to work in the canneries, were significantly more evasive when questioned about deteriorating work conditions, resistance within the plant, and activities during the strike. Ramírez described the pressure as "a very bad feeling."[32] Forced to work so fast that she couldn't look around, she concentrated completely on what she was cutting. When asked about the bathrooms Ramírez responded that the supervisors did not want them to spend too much time in there. Lacking in her descriptions were volunteered details, such as having only ten minutes and three stalls for eighty-four women. Ramírez upon hearing the story of someone working with a cut finger held in the air,

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Rosario Ramírez interview.

insisted, "it is a lie. I have worked here many years and I always see that when something like that happens they stop the line and attend to the person."[33] She softened afterwards and suggested that perhaps it happened while she was not there.

Ramírez had proof that Watsonville Canning cared for its employees. She had suffered a back injury while moving some boxes. Watsonville Canning paid for a corrective operation and she was still able to work because it happened when she was young. She did, however, state that working speed caused problems. There was constant pressure to go faster and faster. But, she added, they could not break the rules, they had to give you "ten minutes, half an hour, and ten minutes."[34] She never saw anyone turn out the lights or pull a fuse. In fact, she would not even have gone on strike if the plant had not boarded up the windows and doors and shut down.[35]

María Barajas also described working conditions in the months preceding the strike to be "completely changed" and the stress to be a "pressure like I had never felt before."[36] But still there were no volunteered details of changed working conditions, no injuries, no shortened breaks, no firings for eating company property. Even when prodded with the thesis that perhaps deteriorating working conditions helped to propel the strike she denied it, "the main reason we went on strike was because they lowered our pay and our benefits.

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[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Ibid.

[36] María Barajas interview.

This is what caused the strike."[37] Barajas never saw any lights go out or any other activity that would have slowed down the work. She did mention that several persons had left their jobs as a result of the "pressure." When asked if they left voluntarily she was vague, "well, the supervisors put us under alot of pressure and we had to do everything exactly right, exactly right. And if you made an error or something, well, they were very strict with us."[38] Barajas also showed up for work on Monday, September 9, 1985, unaware that the strike had begun, to find the doors barred shut.[39]

Sara Arredondo was not certain, prior to the strike, just why the supervisors and floorladies had become so strict. She did recall that supervisors had distributed warnings to individuals who were not meeting the increased cutting quotas and suddenly began enforcing regulations regarding workers' footwear. Arredondo described the situation as very stressful, but could not recall what the increased cutting quota was or what type of shoes met company regulations.[40]

Carmen Vargas did have some details to share about increased pressure immediately preceding the strike and did state that difficult working conditions partially led to the strike decision. She noted that pregnant women often experienced difficulties keeping pace in the processing lines and there were no special considerations made for them. Yes, they did increase the cutting quota on brocolli from nine to eighteen buns per

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[37] Ibid.

[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Sara Arredondo interview.

minute. Supervisors did discourage talking among the workers. Yes, women did cut their fingers, but they could use up to three sick days a year, more than that if they had a doctor's note.[41]

Vargas did experience some resistance within the plant prior to the strike. She was one of the women in line who cut the brocolli so fast that it jammed up the ovens. She also knew that some individuals had tossed screws and nails into the machinery. Many mechanics actually quit their jobs before the strike began. They were so fed up, running from one repair to another. "What else do you do," Vargas asked, " when you feel like a prisoner, you cannot turn around, you have no freedom?"[42]

Vargas also explained that working conditions prior to the strike were better than working conditions ten years later. Prior to the strike a worker only needed fourteen hundred working hours annually to qualify for vacation pay. Now a worker needed sixteen hundred hours, and fewer hours were available, fewer workers qualified for vacation time. Before the strike the office would call and let Vargas choose between processing a crop of spinach that night or coming in the next morning to process brocolli. Ten years later Vargas no longer had a choice, she worked whenever the office demanded. The hours varied greatly and she was able to spend less time with her children.[43]

Neither Rosario Ramírez, María Barajas, Carmen Vargas, Sara Arredondo, or María Barraza were active in the strike. All of them did serve picket duty, a requirement in

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[41] Carmen Vargas interview.

[42] Ibid.

[43] Ibid.

order to receive fifty-five dollars a week in strike benefits, but nothing more. Vargas explained that she had two small children who demanded all of her time.[44] Sara Arredondo did help others during the strike, but not as part of an organized strike activity. Instead, since her children were grown and she was surviving the strike fairly well, she gave extra things, like milk, sugar and juice, to specific families who had children and were suffering.[45]

Arredondo also helped out at nearby Saint Patrick's Church. One Sunday a priest asked Arredondo to help distribute boxes of food to needy parishioners who were suffering as a result of the strike. Arredondo noted that it was easier for her to do since she was at church and among friends. So she took the list and handed out the boxes after the service had concluded.[46]

None of these five women, who still worked for the cannery ten years later, recalled specifically voting to approve a strike on Saturday, 7 September 1985. Ramírez showed up Monday morning at seven a.m. expecting to process a fresh crop of spinach. She claims Watsonville Canning directly caused the strike, not only by lowering wages and benefits, but also by boarding up the windows and locking the gates to the facilities. "It was they who caused the strike, because the people came to work."[47] María Barajas made the same statement: "They forced us to go on strike. When we showed up the whole place was

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[44] Ibid.

[45] Ibid.

[46] Ibid.

[47] Rosario Ramírez interview.

closed. We had come to work and it was all closed . . . by them."[48] Sara Arredondo recalls that there were rumors of a possible strike in the days immediately preceeding 9 September 1985. But she insisted that she did not vote for a strike. "Everyone was surprised. I never went to a meeting, nor did I know that they had meetings to plan the strike. I didn't know anything." In fact, she did not understand why the Union said that there had been a vote, "because no one voted."[49]

None of these women were aware that Richard King, of Teamster's Local 912, had served Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw notice of an official strike decision on Saturday, 7 September 1985. Nor did they know that hundreds of other employees were not only aware of the strike on Saturday, but that many returned Sunday to help make picket signs.[50] Torres, along with five hundred others, had been picketing since five o'clock that morning, in the pouring rain.[51]

No one on the striking side expected the strike to last for eighteen months. Joe Fahey, a representative of Teamsters for a Democratic Union, expected it to last for four or five weeks.[52] Sara Arredondo and María Barajas expected the strike to be over in a

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[48] María Barajas interview.

[49] Sara Arredondo interview.

[50] "Strike Starts; Pickets Walk at Two Plants," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 9 September 1985, 1.

[51] Esperanza Torres interview, 17 November 1994.

[52] Joe Fahey interview.

week.[53] On that first day all Barajas could hope for was a return to normal working conditions-with the same pay and medical benefits.[54] Rosario Ramírez noticed that after the first week, with no signs of improved negotiations, people began to worry.[55]

It was at this point that Ramírez recognized the first signs of strikers organizing themselves into positions of leadership. The union did not appear to be effectively representing the workers. "After a week . . . the union and the owners were talking, and we heard things, but I don't know what happened . . . . And then the people thought to make decisions for themselves . . . because they saw that the union wasn't doing a good [job]."[56] Ramírez, Barajas, Arredondo, Vargas and Barraza had missed out on the weekend's organizing activities. And since they rarely attended union meetings, they could not have known when women first began to assume positions of leadership within the union.[57]

All seven women interviewed agreed that women played a role in the leadership of the strike. Yet those women who returned to work in the plants offered fewer specific details and had not stayed in as close a contact with women leaders as did Torres or Carrisoza. María Barajas could remember that there were three women specifically who were very active in organizing striking workers and serving on committees. However, she

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[53] Sara Arredondo interview; María Barajas interview.

[54] Ibid.

[55] Rosario Ramírez interview.

[56] Ibid.

[57] Ibid.; María Barajas interview.

could only remember one name. Ramírez never tried to convince anyone else to vote for the strike or to go on strike. "I never like to pressure people, it's something they have to decide for themselves." But she had a sister who was very active in strike leadership. Her sister did return to work in the cannery after the strike, but she experienced "too much stress" and quit. "Now she has a better job."[58]

Sara Arredondo did notice that there were some individuals, including women, who traveled to other places like Texas and Washington to gather support for the strike. Perhaps this was the source of the money that provided $55.00 a week to the strikers, she pondered, or, maybe the union paid for that.[59] What Arredondo did not know was that workers from the other five food processing plants in Watsonville had voted to pay five dollars each per week to provide a fund for the strikers.[60]

Esperanza Torres, on the other hand, could provide more details. Not only was she a leader herself, but ten years later she was still in contact with many other leaders in the strike who had taken up additional causes within the Latino community.[61] Fedelia Carrisoza worked on the picket lines and helped distribute food to striking workers. She not only remembered many women who were leaders in the strike, but knew details about each one ten years later: Gloria Betancourt was president of the Strikers' Committee and

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[58] Rosario Ramírez interview.

[59] Sara Arredondo interview.

[60] Kathy Salamon, "Food Workers Approve Strike Fund," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 19 August 1985, 1.

[61] Esperanza Torres interview, 4 December 1994.

divorced shortly after the strike; Cruz Gomez worked on the strike support committee and moved into community service work at the Clinica del Valle del Pajaro, she also ran for City Council; Esperanza Contreras was active too and in July 1995 was reportedly working mornings back at the cannery.

Past experiences were important to each individual's decision on how active to be in the strike. Both Carrisoza and Torres could rely on either their own past leadership experiences or examples of strong women leaders from their childhood. Carrisoza related a wonderful and at the same time sad story of her ambitions as a youngster. Growing up in a very small town in Mexico, with little chance for education, she dreamed of studying law. Her father insisted that money spent on educating a woman was wasted. What would she do with all that education in the kitchen? But she begged and begged. Finally, her father allowed her to try out law school. Away to the big city she went. Within six months Carrisoza was on a hunger strike protesting the government's intrusion into local politics near the university. Her father marched himself out of that little town and dragged Carrisoza home insisting, "I did not spend all that money for you to go on a hunger strike!"[62] Carrisoza described her youth as one constant struggle against her father. She later settled for secretarial school. Esperanza Torres claimed that her decision to become active in the strike "was something from within."[63] But she could also lean on the example her mother provided, actively campaigning for the continuation of bi-lingual education in Watsonville.

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[62] Fedelia Carrisoza interview.

[63] Esperanza Torres interview, 4 December 1994.

Fedelia Carrisoza also pointed to a history of assertion among women in Mexico. Explaining how so many Latina women could fight so hard for so long during the strike, she referred back to the women in Chiapas, Mexico. Carrisoza often reflected on the women she knew in Chiapas, an economically depressed rural area of Mexico that has produced several peasant revolts. "We used them as an example and thought, 'when you are a woman, very oppressed, very oppressed . . . and you cannot bear it anymore' . . . then you decide, 'This is the moment, I take the opportunity to turn myself loose.'" Carrisoza recalls many husbands who were opposed to the strike, but the women fought back. There were many separations and divorces of wives and husbands.[64]

The five women who were still working at the plant did not have similar stories to tell. Rosario Ramírez did experience something similar to the Cannery Workers Strike earlier in her life. She had lived in one of the camps alongside the agricultural fields in Salinas Valley when César Chávez organized the farm laborers to strike in 1979. Ramírez viewed the farmworkers strike in 1979 as definitely different from the Cannery Workers' Strike. "The César Chávez strike . . . it was something . . . but thanks to this strike we got something." The Cannery Workers' Strike "was nothing compared to the César Chávez strike." She had suffered much during "César's strike," but at the end of the year the farmworkers had won the right to unemployment benefits during the offseason, a break in the workday, and portable bathrooms in the fields. Ramírez even had the opportunity to meet and march with César Chávez. She showed a deep respect for him, "he fought for us" she explained. Yet she did not assume a position of leadership or an active role in the

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[64] Fedelia Carrisoza interview.

1979 strike either. Rather, she "suffered" through it.[65] María Barajas described the Cannery Workers' Strike in the same manner, "well, it passed . . . it passed . . . we all hoped that everything would be fixed . . . because . . . a strike is not a very pretty thing."[66]

Sara Arredondo reflected on the message she had received from women in her youth and recalled her stepmother's teachings on the appropriate role of a woman: "Always keep a fire going for when your husband returns home from work. Even if you do not have much to eat, heat a tortilla and some beans and bring a pitcher of water to the table." The fire served a dual purpose as both a literal source of heat for food and also as the warmth, spirit, or inner strength, of the woman herself. The advice given by Arredondo's women role models on the ranch where she grew up was that you should "always burn your fire with charcoal, not gas."[67]

The Watsonville Canning Strike was beset with violence. The Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, the local paper that carried almost daily stories on the progress of the strike, contains overwhelming evidence that strike violence was a concern throughout all of Watsonville. Strikers and their supporters threw rocks, broke windows, blew up cars, shot BB guns, slashed tires, tossed fire bombs into residences, and set fire to Watsonville Canning property. Strikers were bashed with rocks, their cars were bombed, tires slashed, homes vandalized, and their personal safety threatened. They often picketed and marched together confronted by Watsonville Police in riot gear. Editorials continually lamented the

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[65] Rosario Ramírez interview.

[66] María Barajas interview.

[67] Sara Arredondo interview.

violent actions taken by both sides. Daily police reports printed in the Watsonville Register-Pajaronian often listed women as involved in the violence.[68]

Esperanza Torres and Fedelia Carrisoza were much more open about the violence than the women who continued to work in the cannery. Torres' activities in Salinas, where both successful and unsuccessful attempts were made to stop strikebreakers from boarding the bus to Watsonville to work, often put her in a volatile position. She recounted stories of rocks being thrown at the windshields of cars and buses, and of women placing themselves as human obstacles in the path of oncoming buses.[69]

Fidelia Carrisoza admitted to participating in the violence. She threw rocks at the cars of strikebreakers as they drove toward the plant. Strikebreakers who parked their cars in lots in Salinas, then boarded a bus carrying them to Watsonville Canning, returned to find their tires slashed. Carrisoza admitted this with tears and deep regret, but also a justification, "we were fighting for our livelihood and to support our children."[70]

Although they agreed that the strike was exceedingly and unnecessarily violent, all five of the women who returned to work in the cannery absolutely denied not only participating in any kind of strike violence, but also denied seeing anyone else commit an

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[68] "Court Order Places Limit on Picketing," Watsonville Register-Pajaronian, 10 September 1985, 1; "Strike Talks Give Hope," ibid., 11 September 1985, 1; "Weapons Found Near Plant," ibid., 11 September 1985, 2; "City Officials Meet with Strike Principals," ibid., 13 September 1985, 1; "Shaw Gets Court Order Against Teamster Pickets," ibid., 14 September 1985, 13; "Strike-related Incidents Reported," ibid., 18 September 1985, 2; "Picket Hit With Rock," ibid., 20 September 1985, 2.

[69] Esperanza Torres interview, 4 December 1994.

[70] Fedelia Carrisoza interview.

act of violence. The closest account of participation in strike violence came from María Barajas, who described being afraid of potential violence while picketing. Once, while she was picketing outside the gates of the plant a woman inexplicably struck her. The woman looked afraid herself and, though mad, Barajas did not strike back.[71] None of the women, however, stated that the violence was uncalled for. Sara Arredondo simply stated that there were those who served their time on the picket line and then went home, but "there were also those who came back to fight for their rights, their job, because it was an injustice."[72]

A common theme runs through the telling of these experiences. The women who were more active in the strike and did not return to work in the canneries discussed their experiences with much greater ease and detail. Those women who were more passive in the strike and returned to work in the canneries were much more evasive and vague in describing their experiences. Both stories are important because they reflect not only variances present in any population, but also perhaps an indictment against the treatment of an economically disadvantaged minority. In order to provide for their families, many women chose not to resist and continue to "toe the line" today. They accept inadequate wages, long hours working in the icy cold, and days waiting by the telephone for work. For some reason, many of them have yet to find such conditions unacceptable enough to spend their time waiting by the phone also learning to do something else. After more than twenty years, none of these women are citizens of the United States; none have learned to

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[71] María Barajas interview.

[72] Sara Arredondo interview.

speak English. All of them hope that their children will learn from their parents' suffering and choose another way of life.

CHAPTER FIVE

TEN YEARS LATER: THE OMINOUS FUTURE OF FOOD PROCESSING IN WATSONVILLE

> He said, "We want to tell you we're going to close the plant. If you have any questions, call your union." They're treating us like we're their burros - and we've spent almost half our lives here.[1] - Socorro Murillo, Latina Worker

The completion of this study coincides with the ten year anniversary of the Watsonville Canning Strike of 1985-1987. Hindsight often allows for a clearer view of events. In this case, however, history has yet to complete the story.

Many changes have occurred in the food processing industry worldwide and in Watsonville. The 1985 claims of Watsonville Canning and Richard Shaw have been borne out.[2] Mexico's food processing industry is booming, creating a fierce competition with industries in Watsonville. Latina women remain the majority of cannery workers in Watsonville. In December of 1995 eighty percent of workers at Norcal Crosetti spoke only Spanish, seventy-five percent had received their education in Mexico, most likely completing only the sixth grade. Ten percent of the workers had received no education at

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[1] Biasotti, "Watsonville Plant Shutting Down," A1.

[2] Tracy L. Barnett, "Frozen Out? Watsonville Seeks Its Place In A Changing Food Industry Market," Santa Cruz Sentinel, 4 February 1996, A1.

all.[3] These factors will severely limit the choices available to the Latina workers as they face the aftermath of the Watsonville Canning Strike.

Prior to the strike there were four frozen vegetable processing plants in Watsonville.[4] Watsonville Canning folded in 1987, a few months before the strike ended. David Gill, a local vegetable grower, took over the plant, renaming it Norcal, in an attempt to recoup losses suffered by other growers and Wells Fargo Bank after all of them had extended credit to the struck company. A few months later Norcal merged with Crosetti, another local processing plant, and became Norcal Crosetti.[5] The purchase of Norcal Crosetti, one of the biggest employers in the Watsonville area, by Dean Foods Vegetable Company was officially announced on 5 August 1995.[6] Dean Foods also owns the one other remaining frozen vegetable processing plant in Watsonville along with eighteen others across the country.[7] Each of the Dean plants in Watsonville employs at least eight hundred people at the peak of the harvest season. Sergio Lopez of Teamsters Local 912

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[3] Tracy L. Barnett, "Workers Wonder Where Jobs Will Be," Santa Cruz Sentinel, 4 February 1996, A6.

[4]Lane Wallace, "Former 'Frozen-Food Capital Of The World,'" WRP, 11 September 1995, 1.

[5] Marianne Biasotti, "Watsonville Plant Shutting Down," A4.

[6] Jeordan Legón, "Job Market Meltdown In Watsonville," San Jose Mercury News (San Jose, Ca.) 1 January 1996, 1A.; Lane Wallace, "Dean Foods Buys Norcal Crosetti," WRP, 5 August 1995, 1.

[7] Wallace, "Dean Foods Buys Norcal Crosetti,"1.

assured workers that no lay offs were expected when the plant changed hands: "There shouldn't be a hiccup."[8]

Did the workers win in 1987? About half got their jobs back at $5.85 an hour, not $6.66. In February of 1992 basic wages were set at $6.75 an hour, just nine cents above what employees earned at Watsonville Canning prior to the strike and thirty-one cents lower than Richard Shaw's 1982 wage level.[9] These wages were still in effect in November of 1994.[10] And there were fewer jobs. At the peak of the season in 1982 Teamsters Local 912 represented over eight thousand employees. In 1994 that number dropped to three thousand. Those five thousand processing jobs helped support another fifteen thousand jobs industry-wide. Twenty thousand line workers, truck drivers, purchasers, administrators, merchants, clerks, and others no longer worked in the Salinas Valley in 1994.[11]

Sergio Lopez, chief officer of Teamsters Local 912, pointed out that even though pay has not kept up with inflation, and workers still earned less than they did prior to the strike, it has been the willingness of the union to accept low wages that has prevented those jobs that remain in Watsonville from moving to other areas.[12] It was also noted that seventy-five percent of the women who went out on strike are estimated to still be

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[8] Ibid.

[9] Norcal-Teamster Contract, "Exhibit A", 18 February 1992.

[10] Annie Long interview.

[11] Fahey interview; Legón, "Job Market Meltdown In Watsonville," 1A.

[12] Wallace, "Former 'Frozen-Food Capital Of The World,'" 3.

working at the two frozen food processing plants remaining in Watsonville.[13] Lopez's explanation has not sufficed to keep industry and jobs in Watsonville. In January of 1995, as a result of extensive losses in agricultural jobs, Watsonville was one of only thirty cities nationwide to be designated a Rural Enterprise Community, with government grants earmarked to assist in the rebuilding of Watsonville's economy.[14]

Still, when the ten year anniversary of the beginning of the strike arrived, many Watsonville residents not only remembered the difficulties and suffering, but also credited the strike with instigating much needed change in Watsonville. Lydia Lerma, who helped organize food distributions, recalls often working over twelve hours a day sorting and packing up food for striking families. Still, "it wasn't enough. Some people lost their houses. It was very, very hard."[15] Chavelo Moreno, currently a business agent for Teamsters Local 912, gained a great deal of respect for the women strikers: "They were the key to winning the strike."[16]

The Watsonville Police Department was often seen as having taken sides against the strikers. For David Lopez, an officer at the time of the strike, "some situations were like a war zone. . . . I felt so small against a large number of people." Police Captain Chuck

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[13] Lane Wallace, "Food Program, Hard Work Kept Strikers' Effort Alive," WRP, 9 September 1995, 1.

[14] Legón, "Job Market Meltdown In Watsonville," 20A.

[15] Wallace, "Food Program, Hard Work Kept Strikers' Effort Alive," 1.

[16] Ibid.; Lane Wallace, "Workers Held Out for 18 Months," WRP, 9 September 1995, 3.

Carter knew many strikers by name. His mother had worked in the canneries for twenty years.[17]

Others saw the strike as a blessing in disguise. Abel Chávez took advantage of the strike to attend some night classes and get a better job. He is currently a maintenance supervisor at the Carriage House just south of Watsonville and now earns more money.[18] Oscar Rios, currently on the Watsonville City Council, saw the strike as a vehicle for change. "That strike woke people up,"[19] it made the Latino population realize that they had a voice. As a result of both the strike and the suit brought against Watsonville to change the at-large election procedures, more Latinos hold political offices in Watsonville now than ever before.[20]

Don Miller, a reporter for the Santa Cruz Sentinel who covered the strike, credits the strike with bringing changes not only to Watsonville, but also to Santa Cruz. Prior to the strike, the Sentinel, the largest paper in the county, rarely covered events in Watsonville. Now it publishes a special edition for the Pajaro Valley five days a week.[21]

The ten year anniversary was not significant enough, however, to celebrate in the

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[17] Lane Wallace, "Police Caught In The Middle Of Sometimes Heated Strike," WRP, 11 September 1995, 1.

[18] Lane Wallace, "For Some Workers, Strike Was A Chance to Find A New Job," WRP, 9 September 1995, 3.

[19] Lane Wallace, "Strike Brought Political Change To Pajaro Valley," WRP, 11 September 1995, 3.

[20] Ibid.

[21] Don Miller, "Watsonville Canning Walkout Was More Than A Labor Strike," Santa Cruz Sentinel, 15 November 1995, A4. Watsonville is situated in the Pajaro Valley.

same streets and plaza that hosted so many strike activities and confrontations. On Saturday, 9 September 1995, the streets surrounding what once was Watsonville Canning were quiet. Only a few families strolled in the plaza downtown. The union office was closed.[22]

The last ten years have been a period of decline in the frozen vegetable industry. The strongest days for the frozen food industry were the early 1980s. Now there are fewer jobs available in food processing in Watsonville. Some blame competition from Mexico, where Green Giant moved to in 1990.[23] Some interpret events differently, viewing the strike as a turning point. The eighteen month strike put Watsonville Canning out of business and the new company, Norcal, formed to take over the plant, was saddled with fifteen million dollars in debt. Norcal never had a chance to succeed. Smiley Verduzco, second-in-charge at Watsonville Canning during the strike, believes that if the strikers were simply willing to negotiate, to understand that the industry could not support a labor force that earned more than minimum wage, Watsonville Canning would be operating at full capacity today.[24]

Wherever one chooses to place the blame, Watsonville is no longer the frozen food capital of the world.[25] Instead, it can currently boast of having an unemployment rate of

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[22] Observations by author, Watsonville Ca., 9 September 1995.

[23] Wallace, "Dean Foods Buys Norcal Crosetti," 12.

[24] Wallace, "Former 'Frozen-Food Capital Of The World,'" 1.; Donald Miller, "'It Didn't Have to Happen' Verduzco: Strike Led To Decline," Santa Cruz Sentinel, 4 February 1996, D1.

[25] Wallace, "Former 'Frozen-Food Capital Of The World,'" 1.

twenty-four percent, one of the highest in the country. Many factors are listed as causes, the closing of food processing plants, the seasonal nature of agriculture, and the fact that the labor force is mostly Spanish-speaking and uneducated.[26]

Watsonville has also suffered additional calamities that have affected the local economy. In 1989, the Loma Prieta earthquake devastated many downtown businesses. In 1996, approximately twenty percent of Main Street's property is still vacant, a result of quake damage. Then in 1995 floodwaters from the Pajaro River surged through many of the residential areas that housed mostly working-class Latino residents. President Clinton declared Watsonville a National Disaster Zone. Watsonville flooded again, though not as severely, in February of 1996.[27]

More bad news was on the way. Dean Foods announced on 15 November 1995 that it planned to shut down what used to be Watsonville Canning.[28] Dean Foods would also be closing an additional plant in Salinas, an agricultural community with a large Latino population, about thirty miles outside of Watsonville. It is unknown how many jobs will eventually be lost. Some workers will be transferred to the plant originally owned by Richard Shaw in Watsonville. Shaw sold out to Dean Foods in 1988, shortly after the end of the strike. [29]

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[26] Biasotti, "Watsonville Plant Shutting Down," A1.

[27] Legón, "Job Market Meltdown In Watsonville," 20A.

[28] Biasotti, "Watsonville Plant Shutting Down," A1.

[29] Ibid., A4.; Lane Wallace, "Norcal Unsure On Numbers Of Rehired Workers," WRP, 16 November 1995, 1.

Dean Foods may set aside some money to retrain workers for other jobs. One difficulty already foreseen is that most of the workers will need basic remedial educational training and language skills before they could qualify for most other jobs offered in Watsonville.[30] Margarita Martinez, who worked at the plant for twenty seven years remarked: "It's something that's too painful to think about. Finding a job in this town is like trying to find something that's invisible."[31] Leticia Rivera has given up, "as soon as I get some cash, I'm out of this town. Life is too sad here."[32] Socorro Murillo summed up worker reactions: "We have no tears, just anger. We're used to it - we learned a lot about fear and hunger from the strike. . . . We gained a lot of strength and self-worth and learned how to defend ourselves."[33]

This research has demonstrated that those women who were more active in the strike and did not return to work in the canneries described their work and strike experiences in great detail. Those women who were less active in the strike and returned to work in the canneries discussed their work and strike experiences in less detail. No appreciable difference was found in the women's responses regarding personal family experiences before, during, and after the strike. Other researchers have concluded that the strike was an empowering experience for the Latino community in Watsonville. Perhaps the strike empowered most those women who assumed a more active role in the conflict.

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[30] Ibid.

[31] Legón, "Job Market Meltdown In Watsonville," 1A.

[32] Ibid.

[33] Biasotti, "Watsonville Plant Shutting Down," A4.

Perhaps, as Torres and Carrisoza have demonstrated, those women who assumed an active role in the strike were already empowered both by previous life experiences and the example of women who served as role models to them.

Much research lies ahead in the study of how this community of women adapts to increasingly difficult circumstances. The plant that once was Watsonville Canning closed in February 1996. Seven hundred processing jobs were expected to be lost. Most of the workers were still Latina women. How many of these workers will return to Mexico? How many will rely on their aging husbands to continue the strenuous work of picking crops or on children who perhaps made other choices? Finally, what are the shared characteristics of those who will successfully cross this impending hurdle, perhaps learning English and searching out new opportunities? Who are the others who will simply "suffer" through it?

Most of the women interviewed were unable to define what the strike experience meant for their daughters. A challenging yet possibly very informative approach to the continuing study of women in this community would compare the life experiences of the daughters of active and inactive strikers. Will the daughters of the most active strikers go on to become community leaders themselves?

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